

The /x/ PHILES

tales from the web





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For Mootykins & 4chan.org/x/

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This book is the collected imagination and creativity of a small fraction of an even smaller community. This community doesn't exist in a sense of lands, lots or parcels that one pays for with scrip; it exists merely in an ephemeral sense, dread shadows out of the corner of the digital eye.

In this darkness our collective mind is focused on personal truths and horrors that transcend our daily lives, some of it too real to be believed. If the mind is a lens through which we gaze upon our own realities, imperfections accentuate and deepen the experience for better or worse.

These are the experiences of my friends and enemies, all of them from the same walled garden you might pass up while visiting a nearby and familiar place. This is your passport to a land you may never wish to visit, lest you come to stay and decay with us in the shadows.

anonymous
January 2015

the /x/ philes

1. get away

By Anonymous

As I walk out of work, It's 11:00 PM. Ugh, worked the late shift again. I've always hated being in that complex alone; I find it eerie, but I do sometimes find the emptiness fun. I leave the building and begin my journey. I always walk home because I find the public transit in this city disgusting, and walking is good exercise anyway. So I go on my normal route: straight down King Street, take a left, go straight, then right... but wait. Cutting through this alley should allow me to get home faster, and being off the streets as soon as possible is fine; walking my 30 minute commute in the middle of the night creeps me out, so I'll just take the shortcut.

I turn right and now I'm in the middle of this dark, damp alleyway. I'm no longer protected by the sanctuary of the street lights. The darkness surrounds me. I carefully tiptoe forward, so I don't disturb any imagined entities. As I take another step, I hear the sound of a trashcan falling over. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a hunched over creature. Humanoid in

appearance, it certainly doesn't look far from animal. I'm confronted with some ribs and a spine showing through thin skin, bulging eyes, and ripped clothes. I instantly stop in my tracks, horrified, and it begins yelling as if its life depended on it,

"Get away!"

"Get away!"

"Get away!"

Not even thinking, I turn and run. I don't stop running. I run past street lights. I run in front of cars. I run home. In my haste, I fumble with the keys, get inside, and lock the door. What the hell was that thing? It obviously understood language, but it was so primal. Its disfigured, pallid face was stuck in my mind. I hear a bang outside; I have to lock the back door. I have to lock the windows. I have to grab a weapon. I decide that the best plan of action is to sit in front of the door and be on guard. I won't sleep. I won't go into work. This is far more important-- my life could be on the line! I won't do anything until I don't have to worry about this anymore. My real life is on hold as of this moment. I have got to survive. That crash... It knows where I live. I have to get out of here. I slip out the back and start running again. I run as far and as fast as I can possibly manage, and decide to set up in a secluded alleyway. There's no way it could find me here.

I've camped out here for weeks. I'm barely scraping by, but I'm still alive which is all that matters. I think I'm finally safe.

No!

I hear something coming this way!

This might be it... What is it saying?!

I listen in, and hear a voice say:

"Damn it, the late shift again..."

There's absolutely no way that's a human like me. That's just "it" trying to be more normal. Absolutely not. I won't be deluded like that. No more running; I'll kill it if I have to. As the tall man draws closer. I start yelling loudly:

“Get away!”

“Get away!”

“*Get away!*”

He takes off in the opposite direction, and it looks like he’ll keep running until he thinks he’s safe. What was “it”? I don’t know, but survival is the priority. It won’t get me. It never will.

Never.

2.

a road through the sky

By Anonymous

Upon my first horizon I saw
A lion with the greatest claw
Of fire and earth within its maw
Held in the beasts lowly paw

Swept by blue clouds birth dust
With force no greater than trust
Picked up by the eagle of lust
Gentler than a man so robust

The dream is nigh
Ideas fly through skies
Left winded with a sigh
Eyes express fears that cry

Climb evergreens over wind and trees
To see the final horizon
Over the ducks and honey bees
To witness to coming of our phantoms
Shining lanterns over the mass of fandom
God among God, man and OM

3, the scrap yard

By Shaun W.

This story takes place last year, I was 17 and had been dragged along with my dad to stay with his friend, Jack.

Jack lived in a small, mid-western town called Musketville. The town was small, with only twenty or so residents and just one shop. Most residents of the town worked in an only slightly larger town 5 miles away, so they were seldom seen and the entire place had the appearance of a ghost town. The traffic was bad, so as we pulled into Musketville as the light was beginning to fade. As we passed through the outskirts of the little town we passed an old abandoned scrapyard, the walls were hard to see over but I could make out a few low huts, and plenty of rusted old cars. I wasn't expecting to have much fun in this place but going and exploring the scrapyard could give me something to do, I decided against a night-time visit though as the scrapyard looked dark and threatening in the quickly fading light.

We pulled up to Jack's house and knocked on the door, we heard

shuffling, and then a bolt being drawn and the door creaked open. Jack was a stocky man, but walked with a slight limp. He was dirty and unshaven and had large, baggy eyes. He held a shotgun by his side.

Dad motioned for a hug, but Jack stayed put. He glanced past me, towards the old scrapyard.

“Jack” Dad finally got his attention and he welcomed us in with a grunt. Jack pointed at a door upstairs as we passed and muttered something to Dad. I followed them through to the living room, but Dad stopped me and ordered me to take the bags up. I quickly dropped the bags off in our separate rooms and then headed back down, but Dad was waiting for me on the stairs.

‘I think its best to head to bed now, its getting late’ It was only seven and I knew it wasn’t Dad suggesting this, but Jack. Despite being annoyed, I didn’t want to be rude in a strangers house so I bit my lip, turned on my heel and headed up to my room. The room was small and after barely a minute I was bored.

I opened the tatty old curtains and was rewarded with a view over the scrapyard. The walls went round in a rough circle and contained, as I had seen from the road, two low huts either side of a large, metal sheet garage. The whole area was full of scrap cars and assorted hunks of metal, long abandoned and rusty. An old, burnt out Bedford van was parked next to one of the huts.

I quickly got bored of the view and decided to get into bed and try to get some sleep. I awoke with a start in the middle of the night, and a glance at my phone told me it was just past 1 in the morning. I became aware of loud noises outside of the window, metal on metal clanking and the sound of steam hissing, there was also a background hum, like a generator running. I looked out of the window and saw lights emanating from inside the scrapyard, and realised the noises were coming from there too. It took me a while to notice that the burnt out Bedford was no longer sitting by the hut. A feeling of unease swept over me, I knew there was no way that Bedford had

moved, it was barely more than a shell. I quickly drew the curtains closed and got back into bed. The bizarre noises continued into the night, and it was nearing 3 by the time I drifted off.

The next morning, the scrapyard was all I could think of. I flung open the curtains only to see the Bedford back in its place by the first hut. It crossed my mind that I may have been dreaming but I wasn't going to fool myself, I knew I was awake and I knew what I had heard and seen. I got dressed, and then headed downstairs to get some breakfast. It was just Jack sitting in the kitchen, my father was upstairs in the shower. I decided to ask Jack about the scrapyard but considering his attitude towards me already, I doubted I would get very far.

"Mr. Jack?" His head snapped up from the newspaper he was reading. His bloodshot eyes narrowed as I continued. "Whats the story with that old scrapyard? Only, last n-"

Jack cut me off with a wave of his hand, he opened his mouth to speak but at that moment my Dad came in, fresh from his shower. I said good morning and then looked back at Jack, but he wouldn't catch my eye. I headed up for a shower.

Soon after, I decided to go out for a walk, Jack clearly had no intention of having anything to do with me and he and my Dad had decided on spending the day drinking themselves stupid in the dust swept garden. I brought a coke from the town's only shop and then sat out on the curb. The town was lifeless. Eventually, curiosity got the better of me and I decided to attempt to scale the rusted gate of the scrapyard and explore. There was still nobody about as I approached the gates, although the first signs of evening were beginning to set in. I put my foot up on the ancient padlock and began to heave myself up. It was easy, and my leg was halfway onto the top of the gate when a car horn made me jump, and lose my balance. My raised foot caused me to flip as I fell and I landed painfully on the back of my neck. I angrily brushed myself down as I stood up and looked around for the car which had honked me. But there was nothing to be seen. The road was

empty and the only car in view was a dormant Cadillac outside a home 100 meters away. The familiar feeling of unease settled in my stomach once again as turned back to face the scrapyard. The iron gates loomed over me. I decided to abandon my exploration for the day and I headed back to the house. I reached the house and knocked on the door, Jack called out from inside.

“Come in” Came the muffled voice of Jack. I walked into the living room to find Jack applying first aid to a large gash across my father’s forehead. I rushed over to his side, only for him to wave me away.

“I’m fine, I’m fine...” I sat down on the sofa next to him and asked him what had happened.

Jack’s narrowed eyes never left my face as Dad told the story. “It was nothing, I’m fine, it was just some drunk driver or something is all” He touched the wound on his head as he continued. “I was coming back from the neighbors, I’d just gone to ask for some sugar and this damn crazy driver just came out of nowhere and knocked me down, damn near killed me” I glanced at Jack, who was still watching me intently.

“So did you see the driver? Did you get his plates?” My Dad let out a little chuckle but grimaced half way through and put a hand up to his head.

“The car was a wreck! No plates, nothing, looked like it belonged in a damn junk-yard.”

The mention of a junk-yard sent a shiver down my spine, and my thoughts went back to the Bedford. I brought my Dad a glass of water and then, after making sure he was OK, went on up to my room.

That night my sleep was interrupted, once again, by the sounds of the scrapyard. I listened for a while and then plugged in my headphones, deciding that tomorrow night I would sneak out, swallow my fear and investigate. Sleep came a little easier knowing I would confront the source of my uneasiness tomorrow.

The next day passed slowly, and the knot in my stomach gradually grew and grew. My father laid off the drinking because of his head but they still

spent most of the day out in the garden. I spent my day keeping watch over the scrapyard, looking out for any sign of the absent Bedford. Alas, Night fell without incident, and by midnight I was ready to go. I packed a pocket knife, gloves and my phone and then silently slipped out into the night. The town looked menacing in the dark, and the first stirrings of fear began to creep up on me. I reached the gate and scaled it quickly, landing softly in the dirt on the other side. For a few nerve racking moments, all the shadows around me were moving and reaching out to grab me, but then I found the light on my phone and was able to illuminate my surroundings. The rusted hulks of cars and trucks surrounded me and I could imagine someone, or something, watching me from the shadows, waiting to jump out...

I headed towards the huts, confidence slowly building with each uninterrupted step. I reached the first building, its low form was like an extension of the forgotten vehicles around it. The door was rotten and came open easily. It lead into an office containing a long collapsed desk and a lifetime's worth of dust. My attention was drawn to some polaroid pictures scattered across the desk, and I moved my phone closer to examine them. The blueish light gave the hut a ghostly atmosphere. The pictures showed what I assumed to be the owner and his wife, happy and smiling. The scrapyard looked almost new, and another picture showed the Bedford truck, its perfect red paint sparkling in the sunlight. I studied the pictures for a few moments more but then decided to move on and investigate the garage. I closed the door behind me as I moved through the darkness to the garage. The large, double doors were stiff with age and I couldn't get them to budge. I stepped away to move onto the next hut, but noticed a hole in the bottom of one of the doors, easily large enough for me to fit through. I put my phone between my teeth and slid through the hole. Once inside, I stood up and brushed myself off, before shining the light around to reveal the contents of the garage. What I saw made me gasp, two vehicles stood inside the garage, an old, glassless station wagon and, next to it, the Bedford van. The light from my phone revealed fresh blood on the hood of the station wagon

and I remembered my fathers words from earlier. Real horror set in now, the doors to the garage had clearly not been moved for years and yet, I had seen the Bedford sitting outside just two days ago.

I decided I had seen enough and turned to leave but what I saw then tipped me over the edge, the hole I had crawled in through was gone, leaving me trapped inside the garage.

Fear defeated rationality and I began to kick at the flimsy metal wall, hoping to break it down. I could feel the wall beginning to give but then a noise behind me interrupted. The sound of an engine. Someone had started up the Bedford. I let out a rabid, animal scream and, with one last desperate kick, the wall exploded in a shower of dust. I didn't have time to rationalize that there was no way that burnt-out, beat-up Bedford could start, I just needed to get out of there. I ran, ran for my life. But halfway to the gate, as freedom was tantalizingly close, strong hands grabbed me and pulled me in. I kicked and struggled but a gruff voice shouted to stop. I gasped when I realized it was Jack. He had his shotgun trained on the doors of the garage and I heard him mutter.

“Come on you bastard.”

There was a sudden roar as the Bedford came flying out of the garage, a dark figure in the drivers seat. I dived from Jack's side as he yelled out and fired, the bullets hit the truck as the truck hit him, crushing him against the gates. For a moment everything was still, but then I found my feet and ran in the opposite direction, scaling the wall to escape.

The next few nights were quiet, with no signs of life from the scrapyard. A search was conducted, but Jack was never seen again. He was presumed dead and the funeral was held six months later. It was only then that my father told me the story of Eric, Jack's brother. Eric had owned the scrapyard with his wife, Irene, but when he found out he had gone bankrupt he decided to kill himself. One night he shot his wife and, after burning out his prized, fire engine red Bedford, he shot himself in the office of his scrapyard.

The funeral was a dire affair, and me and my father were the only attendees. After we said our last goodbyes and Jack was lowered into the ground, we turned back to the parking lot, just in time to see a red Bedford disappear round the corner.

4.

beyond a shadow of a drought

By T.J. Lats

A man rode along the sad field of corn. It was late and he knew to go home. They would take his farm after this season. Half the crop was already resting on the dirt, its tan more yellow and dry than the day before.

A gift for the bugs.

He cut the engine and walked the remaining steps towards his house.

“Honey! I’m home!” The giant bee emerged from the basement.

It buzzed “You have done well farmer, and the sacrifice is at the steps of fruition - the gods of the soil feast on your rot ... give them their final gift and the shadow will ungrasp the water.”

“I will.” he held open his mouth and the bee returned by impolinating him.

The next day the farmer went out to his field like usual, and he whispered to the few stalks of corn still sickly standing up.

And he laid down. And by the time the bank men came they were surprised by a variable forest of green corn, and towering above all the stalks was the tallest sunflower he had ever seen - casting a shadow over the field.

5. balancing bottle

By Anonymous

A few years ago my brother and I stopped at a gas station on our way out of town. We went into the station, purchased some drinks and went back to our car.

As we were walking, out of the corner of my eye I noticed this weird empty water bottle in between two of the pumps. The bottle was, strangely, balancing on its corner and spinning very slowly around the fulcrum. This immediately struck me as odd, so I stopped to stare at it and pointed it out to my brother. We both walked up to it to examine it closer. The bottle was completely empty and as far as I could tell just seemed to be inexplicably balancing

there. I reached down and attempted to push it down onto its side. As soon as I let go it slowly raised back up to its original position. As soon as I pushed the bottle it seemed as if all hell broke loose. Another car in the station started beeping its horn, the gas station attendant started screaming

at some guy behind the counter in the station, and at the same time we hear some lady yell “Hey... Hey don’t touch that!”

We looked up and a woman in her 50’s with sunglasses comes wandering out of the garage. “Don’t touch that! My daughter collects these,” she said. She then grabbed the bottle off of the ground and wandered back to the garage without saying another word. Before we could say anything she was gone. Once she left the chaos subsided: the car stopped

beeping and everything returned to normal. The whole ordeal only lasted a few seconds.

To this day I have no idea what the lady meant by “my daughter collects these”. It just didn’t make any sense. As far as I could tell she was not an employee of the gas station either, yet she wandered out of and returned to the garage as if that’s just where she was supposed to be. We’ve often joked that we saw was a “glitch” in reality and a random person was spawned out of nowhere to take care of it. What would have happened if she hadn’t have been there, we’ll never know.

6.

the penspike bubble

By Anonymous

The history books and records for the town of Penspike spoke of an old wasteland, just beyond the last house, where, if the time is right, and the person is right, time itself would unravel and reveal secrets of the past and future. This place was known as the Penspike bubble.

I came across this legend one day whilst searching for some history on the towns' church. The first mention was in the record book of 1865, and told of a 'Heinous daemon' who was banished to the wasteland by the townsfolk. It detailed how the creature was trapped their, and will remain their until the end of time. Intrigued, I read up on the history of this wasteland and, sure enough, there were plenty of stories to be found of a devil or demon who could disrupt time, residing in the wasteland.

I decided I would pay a visit to this place and two days later I departed from my familiar surroundings to venture into the countryside, in search of the Penspike bubble. Upon arrival, I avoided the locals and headed away

from the town, consulting an old map. The map led me into a small wood, and, navigating by eye, I came across a circular wasteland among the trees. The lush greenery of the English countryside seemed to cower at the edge of the wasteland, for nothing grew there. A breeze rushed through the trees as I contemplated stepping into the wasteland and soon, not one to be spooked by a dead spot, I moved out of the grass, and into the circle.

Upon entering the wasteland everything changed, the wind died down and the pleasant, cheerful wood which I had just exited turned dark, and menacing. Much to my own alarm, I became aware of somebody standing behind me. I whirled around, stepping quickly away from the man. His face was horrifying, the flesh blackened and ragged, he had clearly sustained major burns. He did not speak and, allowing fear to overcome me, I ran out of the wasteland and back to my car.

My life continued normally after my visit to the wasteland and I pretty much forgot my experience, allowing life to whisk me along in its ever moving stream. Last year however, after an accident with an exploding gas canister, I learned the truth about the man in the clearing.

It was me.

7.

rumors of the murmurs

By T.J. Lats

A man was sitting at the operator booth of a rickety Ferris wheel, at an unnamed park, in a quiet town. A quiet murmur echoed through the fair, and reminded him of the small crowd wandering around, somewhere.

But the Ferris wheel was not the focal point of this fair, maybe only 5 or so people had even been on it - today was even more peculiar.

No one had been on it, and the fair was nearly closed.

The man took the key out of the booth's ignition, and strung a dirty "closed" sign across the platform's stairs.

He walked towards the crowd's quiet vibrations, even if the Ferris wheel wasn't the most popular attraction you'd still expect to see someone pass by after an all day shift.

The murmurs stayed the same quiet but engaged level that he heard back at his booth, until finally he could see the back of a large crowd - a circle gathered around something.

And even over the large crowd he could see something very tall. He pushed his way through the "oohs" and walked past the "ahs" and before he knew it he was in the center of the crowd.

And the murmurs stopped.

8, the light

By Anonymous

I was always the type who took life for granted. I never really thought much about the future, I just lived from day to day. I went about my business in blissful ignorance of the world around me. I won't say there were no bad times, but I weathered the storm as best I could and moved on.

Then, one day there was a terrible accident. I can't even remember what happened, exactly, just that I felt like I was being crushed. I closed my eyes, I don't know for how long, and when I opened them again, I was floating. I looked down and saw what looked like my body. It was so big. How did I get so small? I didn't have very much time to dwell on that, because I was trying to tear my eyes away from the sight of my mangled corpse and focus on the nearby surroundings. Where was I? It was so dark. And then I spotted a pinpoint of light off in the distance.

I realized I must be dead. That had to be it, right? So, naturally, I started to "drift" toward the light, trying to grow accustomed to this new feeling of

floating in the air. As I got closer to the light, however, I started to hesitate. I felt uneasy for no discernible reason. Then, as if to encourage me, I heard a large, booming voice proclaim “Walk toward the light.”

What choice did I have? I headed for the light again, but once more, that eerie, uneasy feeling crept over me. Something about this felt wrong. The closer I got to the light, the more I sensed some sort of force, some strange and terrible power surrounding it.

The voice came again. “Walk toward the light.” It was trying to guide me, why should I not listen? Where else was there to go in this gloomy darkness? Back to my broken shell of a body? Again, I floated toward the light. I could feel the energy coming from it now and the intense brightness nearly blinded me. Still, I edged closer. And then I heard a sound I will never forget and felt a pain throughout my entire being. There was a sharp, loud crackling noise, then a faint sizzle. My vision and my hearing began to fade, but just before my senses left me completely, I heard the voice again. It was laughing.

“That’s the fifth one already! Can you believe it?!”

Another voice replied “They fall for it every time.”

“Hey look, here comes another one.”

Everything went silent as I plunged into the darkness.

9. the plea

By Anonymous

For years now, I have lived in fear. Not fear of ghosts or monsters under the bed, but fear of them, and, ultimately, fear of becoming their victim. I know about them, and I'm going to tell you about them. They're ruthless, they control the entire world, from the transport systems to the banks. How do I know this you ask? Well, it wasn't easy, I had to research, I had to meet crazy people, hell I'm pretty sure I even saw one of them before, in person. Up in New York, behind this old, derelict superstore, lord knows what he was doing there, I ran for it straight away, make no mistake. Its rare y'know, to see one I mean, because there pretty easy to recognize if you do. There tall, about seven foot, and they wear these black suits, that are all baggy and wrinkled. I never got to see the face when I saw one, just the back, but all the rumors and legends are pretty specific if you know where to look. Their faces are said to be gaunt and slender, with waxy skin and bright blue eyes. They are generally bald, although some have been reported to have lank,

shoulder length blonde hair. Their skin is said to look like a poorly fitting mask, loose over the skull. The stuff of nightmares I tell you. They talk funny too, like they don't really know the language.

So yeah, although it has been somewhat exciting, chasing these leads and uncovering lost legends, I mostly wish I could go back to when I knew nothing of them, because now, I'm pretty sure they are on to me. Everyone who hears about these things ends up dying, sooner or later, but before they get me, I'm putting this out there. Jacob Grenn, who runs the fish shop where I work told me a fella was in there looking for me earlier, strange bloke, he said, something off about him. That was an hour ago, now I'm waiting, I keep seeing them out of the corner of my eye, but I know it's no illusion, they're here. So if your reading this, your in danger, but now you know, spread the word, we have to free ourselves. The net is closing in on me, but you, you have time so get out there but if you would liked to no more please come to my home at 341 oakfeld drive moreno valley california we could discuss them and talk about them I will be waiting to see you thank you.

10.

the puppet and the doctor

By Anonymous

I call him the Doctor. He is a tall white colored creature, that wears a doctors coat and a tissue that covers his face. His hands are long and bony. I've never heard him speak, and not once has he tried to hurt me, but I can't say the same for the others.

Most of these dreams start off by showing a person during a typical day in their life. Then, during some part or their routine, they see a glimpse of the Doctor. They think nothing of it. As they continue, the world around them begins to turn black and white, and they are 'transported' into a very 20's like city. They always find their way into a large, wooden hotel, where a party is taking place. Among the party guests, there is an older woman that is smoking a cigarette in one of those cigarette holders. She is wearing a black dress and a white cap, and on her neck is a beautiful diamond necklace. Her hair is short and she has a mole on her left cheek. She laughs and says, "You really shouldn't be hear, hon." She coughs and wheezes. The

person never listens.

The person continues out of the room and they find a flight of stairs that look out of place for a hotel in the 20's. They go up the stairs until they reach the top, where lightning strikes and they fall. At this point, their heart begins to beat so hard that I can feel it. They stand up and express that they want to go home, but blocking their path is the figure of the doctor. The person screams in horror at the sight and they desperately try to open any of the hotel room doors that covered the walls. However, the doors turn to decals before they can make their escape.

The person screams and bangs on the painted doors, begging for anyone to help, but their pleas fall on deaf ears. Then, they will turn around to see that the doctor has vanished. Covered in tears, the person will dash down the steps and make it back into the room where the party was being held, only to find nobody there. As if everyone had simply vanished. The person makes their way over to the table where the woman once sat, where her cigarette is still smoking. They find her necklace on the table and are compelled to pick it up. The ground shakes, and you can hear the woman laughing. The person falls to the floor and puts their hands over their head and screams for everything to stop. A hand touches them, and the person turns to face them. Instead of another person, it is a puppet with eyes that shine blue. The person lashes out at the puppet and scrambles for the exit. Sobbing, the person runs through the town, crying out for help, only to find that nobody is there.

At this point, the dream can end in one of two ways.

1) As the victim is running, the puppet grabs their leg and the person falls. They struggle to try and escape, but cannot. The doctor then appears, and supposedly murders the defenseless victim. I never see what happens, all I hear is their screams.

2) The person loses all hope, and gives up. They will find the doctor in front of the hotel and plead with him to make everything stop. He then walks up to the person and puts his hand on their cheek. The person will

fall. As they struggle to breathe, the doctor will lean over them. He lowers his napkin, showing that he has eyes. The eyes are glowing blue, just like the puppet. As the person's gaze meets the doctor's, they will begin to turn into the very same puppet that they saw before.

11. verdigris

By Anonymous

When I was a child, fairies existed. I didn't just believe in them; they were there, a reality that I never thought to question. I suppose other children of my temperament would have had imaginary friends, but my mother had spoiled me all my short life with tales of magic and wonder and pixie dust, and so I had my fairies. I didn't call them that at the time, but looking back, that's the best way to describe the small folk who played among the forest of crystal green bottles my grandmother collected and displayed on a large vanity in her room. I don't know how many times I sat alone in that room, or how long each vigil lasted. It may have been often, or only a handful of times, but my earliest and most distinct memory is of watching them my fairies dance through the afternoon sun as it came into room and was reflected in the crystal and glass bottles becoming a maze of light. No other moment in my memory can compare to the clear and simple childhood joy of that golden afternoon.

They never spoke, not that I recall. At the very least, I never understood them. Neither were they interactive. They played together and I watched them. You would have thought they didn't notice me if it hadn't been for the occasional wave or giggle. They seemed to be delighted by my observance of them, but indirectly so. Once again, I saw no strangeness in this. I was a child, a child with a vivid and vast imagination, with little context for what reality consisted of. It didn't seem odd that my fairies didn't seem to come from anywhere or go anywhere when they were finished frolicking. They were simply there, suddenly, as if they always had been; when they left, it was as if they'd slowly faded away. You would, though, be hard pressed to state exactly when.

The strangest part looking back are the lengths of time which these memories seem to cover. I must have sat still and quietly watched those little fairies for hours. I was a different sort of child, I'll admit; a lonely kid who didn't mind loneliness. I had a large, loving family, and still managed to keep entirely to myself. All the same, I was a child, and even quiet children can easily become fidgety. So it seems odd that there were no feelings of restlessness or impatience; just a hazy contentedness to simply watch. In fact, there is a very dream-like haze to those memories, and at times I'm tempted to simply write them off as such. Beautiful and precious dreams perhaps, but still only dreams. Strengthening this idea, is the fact that my family never mentions what would have looked like very strange behavior, but that can be explained by the fact that I was a very private child and talked little even to them. It could very well have seemed entirely normal.

It feels wrong, though, to write off a whole chapter of my childhood as merely being dreams. It's bitter to think that the most memorable parts of being a child occurred while I was asleep. My family only lived in my grandparents home for a couple of years, and I continued to watch the fairies throughout that time period. They were always in that same room, and only ever among the harlequin paradise created in the midst of those sunlit bottles. These memories remain powerful, and as young as I was, startlingly

clear. I remember very little else from that period of my life. While I know I'd be frightened if I were to experience such things now that I'm older and, maybe wiser, I sometimes wish I could see that magic again. Even now, whenever I come across an old bottle, I get a little tingle and can't help but think of it as anything but magical.

12.

dr. gibbous' last performance

By Anonymous

The streets were deserted, and the night was cold. There isn't much to do in the small desert town of Luna, in mid-western America. There are no cinemas, playgrounds or swimming pools, and there is only four shops. There is, however, a theater. The theater is generally closed, although I was lucky enough to catch a performance on this night. It was the last performance of the little-known magician, Dr. Gibbous.

If gossip is to be believed, Dr. Gibbous was the best thing to ever come out of the town of Luna, and that isn't saying much. Dr. Gibbous was a drunk by day, and a sub-par magician by night. The locals often saw him around town, drinking, and muttering to himself. He had dark skin, with gaunt eyes, and a wispy, silvery beard. He walked with a stick that was a cut up old curtain pole. Needless to say, the locals didn't attend his show often. Luna isn't the type of place to attract tourists, so the doctor's shows were often performed to nothing but empty seats. Eventually the theater stopped opening, and the

locals guessed he had moved away, or died.

I found myself in Luna after setting out four hours late on a truck-driving delivery. Deciding that I couldn't continue through the night, I pulled into the quiet town and stopped my truck in a lay-by, just across from a small trailer park. I settled into bed above the cab, but soon realized I couldn't bare to spend another second in the stuffy, uncomfortable truck. I headed out into the night, pulling my coat tight around me. I very quickly realized there was nothing of interest in the small town, and began to head back to my truck.

But then I noticed it. The building looked like a typical theater, with arched windows and a red brick exterior. The posters on the outside were old and tattered, and several of the windows were broken. Despite this, the door was open, revealing a brightly lit interior. Intrigued, and with nothing else to do, I crossed over the street, and entered the building. The lobby was deserted, and the red carpet was frayed and tattered. I noticed a figure inside the ticket booth, and so I walked over. The window to the booth was dirty and dusty, and I could see almost nothing of the person inside.

"Uhh, what's showing tonight?" I asked. The booth operator let out a dry laughter, and then spoke with a gravelly voice.

"We've got you a treat tonight good sir" His tone was mocking as he continued on. "The greatest show in the whole wide world, The fabled Dr. Gibbous delivers his once in a lifetime final performance"

Annoyed by his attitude, but not enough to walk out, I paid \$10 and headed towards the double doors, just past the booth. The doors were stiff with age, but I soon had them open, and stepped through, into the theater itself. The theater was small, and dark, with about fifty or so rows of chairs, facing a small stage at the front. I noticed the figures of a few more people sitting in the rows, so I wasn't alone. I peered closer as I noticed none of the figures had moved. Moving down the isle to get a better look, I realised that the figures weren't people, but mannequins. I seriously considered turning around and leaving but then, as if reading my mind, the ancient red curtain

parted, revealing the doctor himself, leaning on his cane on the center of the stage. He looked frail, but when he spoke, his voice was powerful. I took a seat beside a mannequin.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I welcome you to what will be, with great regret, the last show of me, Dr. Gibbous.’ He spoke as if addressing thousands, but caught my eye as he did so.

The show began, and, much to my disappointment, it was not as exciting as he made it out to be. An hour passed and Dr. Gibbous announced that his next would be the last trick of the evening.

‘Alas, we have come to the final illusion of the evening, and for this trick, I will need a volunteer from the audience!’ He looked around, as if pondering who to choose from a large selection. Of course, his eyes, inevitably, came to rest on me.

‘You sir! Join me on the stage and do me the honor of participating in my final trick!’ Reluctantly, but with little choice, I made my way down the aisle, and slowly approached the small stage. Dr. Gibbous looked down at me, but did not speak as I climbed up onto the stage. He turned to the ‘audience’ as I shook his hand.

‘Well it seems we’ve certainly got the right guy for the job!’ He winked at the empty seats. He retrieved a length of rope from the back of the stage, the rope was attached to something up in the rafters.

‘For this last trick, I will disappear from mid-air! And that is the last the world will see of Dr. Gibbous!’ He tied the rope in a loose knot around his mid-section, and then motioned for me to pass him a large sheet which lay on the stage.

‘Now, I will wrap these sheet around me, so that I am obscured from view, and then, this kind gentlemen here, will pull on the rope and hoist me into mid air, where I will perform my greatest trick.’

He spread his arms wide for the empty theater, and then, after pulling the sheet around himself, nodded to me. He was completely shrouded in the sheet as I tugged on the rope, pulling him up toward the rafters. A hand

came up within the sheet, signaling for me to stop. A muffled voice came from within the sheet, probably exclaiming that this was his finest hour.

The lumps that were his hands moved to his mid-section, and seemed to adjust the rope. Moments passed as he continued to wrestle with the rope and I began to think he was unable to complete the trick. Suddenly though, the rope slipped and his body fell, quickly, downwards. I moved forward in an effort to catch him, but the body didn't fall. I looked up, realising what had happened. The rope had come loose around his body, but had caught around his neck. Dr. Gibbous' body danced, manically, suspended from the ceiling. I ran back to the rope and quickly lowered him to the ground, hoping to save him. I rushed back to the body and pulled off the sheet. But it was not Dr. Gibbous that lay inside, it was a smiling mannequin.

13. oblivion

By Anonymous

The lamp in the corner flickered, then went out, and Matt Somerset began to cry. He sat very still in the center of a worn gray sofa, shaking softly. His deep, broken sobs filled the silent, and garishly lit room. He was surrounded by an odd assortment of differently sized lamps and haphazardly plugged in night lights. There was no decorative theme to these; they were there for a strictly utilitarian purpose. In one corner a large lamp's bulb had burned out, and though it was only a slight difference in lighting it frightened Matt deeply. He didn't know how much longer he could go on.

He hadn't eaten or drank in what seemed like days. His stomach roared in protest and his tongue felt like a stiff and dried out sponge. Every muscle in his body was on fire, aching with fatigue. Despite his hunger and thirst - despite the hellish situation he now found himself in - there was one thing John desired more than anything else in the world. Sleep. He just wanted the comfort of a warm bed and a soft pillow. To have these things though,

would mean his death. To sleep would be to let the darkness in.

On the other side of the room another light began to flicker softly. It was a child's night light, a small smiling blue moon. As the bulb went out, an ice cold chill shot through Matt's fear soaked body.

So this is how it ends, he thought. Alone in the dark. He was giving up and he knew it. He could no longer hold on, and even if he could, it was quickly becoming obvious it would do no good. Several rooms in Matt's home were now completely unlit, and the darkness seemed to seep out of them slowly. Inarticulate screams and hellish whispers echoed through the darkened rooms. Although he couldn't understand the language, the meaning was clear. His end was coming, and his end was inevitable.

It had been several weeks ago when he had first heard the whispers, and at that time, they had come only at night. Matt had been concerned when he first thought he heard faint sounds coming from the deep shadows in his bedroom, but once the sounds began to remind him of voices, he believed he was going mad. And then things had seemed to escalate so quickly; the murmurs grew each night in both clarity and volume. He tried to block them out, hoping beyond hope that they would just go away. It wasn't until he started to see glimpses of what was speaking that he went to see a professional.

"So you believe that something is speaking to you at night, Mr. Somerset? Something that lives in the dark?" the psychiatrist had asked him calmly, as if it were a very natural thing.

"Yes...well, no. It's THE dark, doctor," replied John. "Or at least, I think it is. Or as if something is using the darkness..." His voice trailed off and he stared at the floor. He had looked very pathetic, small and lost. There was no way to explain what was happening to him that made any sense. How could he possibly explain something so far beyond his comprehension? For the voices had begun to fill him with ideas of a dark beyond the darkness, to see, as if through murky water, an underlying blackness that undulated in a way that was almost organic. It was only visible at the corners of rooms, in

the darkest shadows. It seemed to be probing for a way in. And it was alive. Matt knew this instinctively, in the same way he knew that this “thing” had always been there, living in the dark places, feeding off the light. It was only now that he was becoming aware of it that it was returning the favor and seeking him out.

Then one night, he woke in a cold sweat to a dark room and the remnants of a shattered light fixture scattered across his bedspread. The horror he had previously only caught glimpses of seemed to have broken through whatever had been separating it from reality and now stretched, clearly visible, along one wall. It spread rapidly along the edges of the room like mold, unashamed in its corruption of reality. From within its depths the voices rang, loud now and chanting. Almost angry. Matt had been paralyzed by the sound. He hadn't known what to do. He simply lay in his sweat, staring in fear and shock. All he could do was scream inside his head: scream that this wasn't possible, that it wasn't happening. He stayed that way until morning, the sunlight through the window finally driving the dark away.

He had begun to buy the lights then: Night lights, lava lamps, desk lamps. Anything and everything he could find that would emit light. Beautiful, pure light that drove the darkness and the madness away. He had filled his home with them, and he had felt safe. The darkness had been conquered; the voices quieted. Sometimes, though, it was almost as if he could hear them just beyond the reaches of consciousness, scratching behind the walls of reality and trying to break through. This was the only way Matt could describe what he felt, and what he heard. Still, those small moments of uneasiness were a blessing compared to the nightly torments he had endured before the lights, and so he was almost grateful for them.

From then onward, it was a nightly struggle of will for Matt to keep the darkness out. Even with his home well lit he had to work to keep the dark away, for it still had power; Matt's light-bulbs were often short-lived. They would burn out inexplicably or - more dramatically - burst in an explosion of sparks and shattered glass. When the lights were gone, Matt could do

nothing to drive away the dark. Each time this happened it seemed to seep closer, filling more of the room.

His sanity was saved only by the sun. During the day he didn't have to worry about the dark or the voices. He was safe. His sleep schedule flipped, as he was no longer able to sleep at night. Luckily, Matt worked as a freelance designer over the internet so his work hours were flexible enough to accommodate this change. He still dreaded the night though, and often felt sick as he watched the sun go down. Still, he felt confident he could hold his dark stalker at bay. He had regained a semblance of control over his life.

This did not last long. He began to notice the dark seeping into every aspect of his life, even during the day. Shadows seemed to be thicker, voices echoed out from the empty buildings he passed on the street.. Sometimes, when returning from shopping or some other errand, he would notice a creeping darkness in an alleyway or in the shade of a building's stoop. Then he would run home and try to pretend that it was simply the stress of his nightly ordeals getting to him.

Then, what might have been several days ago, Matt noticed that morning was taking an abnormal amount of time to arrive. The clock stated the time as nearly 10 am and still, there was no sign of light outside. His stomach clenched tightly when he noticed this, dreading what it might mean. Standing, he had walked towards the door, his palms sweaty, and opened it with a deep breath.

There was nothing. No moon, no stars, no street lights. Beyond the small patch of yard illuminated by the porch light, the outside world no longer existed. He had closed the door slowly, feeling cold, and then turned and walked toward the coach. He had sat there, barely breathing, and waited. He had been sitting there that entire time, unable to eat or to sleep or to drink, and all too aware of the darkness closing in around him. However, even when he knew it was over, he still resisted. He was simply too afraid to just give up. But that was then, now he was far too sleep deprived and dehydrated even to care. He adjusted himself to a laying position on the sofa.

There was a loud pop, as somewhere another light bulb exploded. It brought no reaction from Matt. He closed his eyes, looking into the red-tinged dark. In that moment, he no longer felt any fear. Just a relieved welcoming. Matt Somerset slept.

14.

a macabre audience

By N.G. Burns

I used to love playing out in the woods behind my house with my brother. Living out in the country there wasn't much else to do. My brother and I were always exploring, up until the day he died. We would be out until dark, seeing just how far the forest extended out into the countryside. The dense woods seemed to go on forever to our innocent eyes, and as far as I know it does. We never got to the end of it, my brother and I. The furthest we ever got was the cemetery.

My brother was the first one to find the cemetery. We were deep into the forest, further along than we'd ever gotten before when he tripped whilst running towards something he saw on a tree. He'd injured his knee pretty badly on a rock, breaking the skin. As I helped him clean his wound I noticed that the skin was broken in the shape of the letter U. I looked more closely at where he fell and saw that what I first thought was just a rock, was actually a neglected gravestone.

Further investigation revealed that there were many more gravestones accompanying it. The markers were barely recognizable until properly inspected, revealing that this was indeed a long abandoned cemetery. The markers were covered in moss and horribly eroded, leaving very few legible words to signify who resided beneath.

What had originally caught my brother's eye was what turned out to be an alder tree that grew around a gravestone, carrying it out of the ground and embedding it inside its gnarled bark. I was intrigued as I had never seen anything like this before. I examined the rest of the tree, trying to see what other treasures it held inside. I was looking at the roots of the tree and searching for other remnants of the past, when I looked up again and met the sunken gaze of a skull, embedded in the tree.

The skull was supposedly the owner of the grave-marker on the other side of the tree. It was bleached by lost years of shafts of sunlight beating down on its brittle surface through the trees while moments in the shade let moss creep a path along its crumbling brow. The tree beneath the skull leaked sap, which trickled out of the corner of the skull's empty eye socket and traced a path along the contours of its face.

I was hypnotized by the skull. I had no idea how long I looked into its empty sockets, but I'm sure it would have gone on forever if my brother hadn't called out for me, jolting me back to reality. His call surprised me, as it broke the comfortable silence I had lost myself in. It was in that moment that I realized my surroundings were just that. Silent. I had never encountered this before whilst exploring the woods. There had always been a chorus of birds chirping, leaves rustling and bugs humming. In retrospect, I now realize it was because I was in a place of death, and that all with a brain avoided that cemetery due to an inherent instinct of self preservation. In the moment, however, I simply thought of it as a peaceful silence as one would expect to find in a sacred place.

With difficulty I tore my eyes from the skull and set them instead upon my pouting brother. He claimed that he didn't like it here, and that his

knee was beginning to worsen. I reluctantly took him home, thinking that I would return the next day to further inspect the skull. By the time we returned home however, my brother could barely walk from the intense pain in his knee. He had also began sweating and ran a terrible fever. Our mother greeted us smiling and made a remark about how we had arrived home early. Her smile faded as she saw my brother, whom she quickly guided upstairs to properly dress his wound. She decided to wait until the next morning to see if his condition bettered. It never did.

The following month of my life was a delirious blur of gore and dreams too vivid to ever forget. During the day, I was expected to attend my brother's bedside, keep him company, lend my prayers and thoughts to him. Little did anyone else know, my thoughts were of the cemetery, and more specifically of the skull in the tree. I would dream of it, sleeping and awake, and it would talk to me. It would tell me to visit it, out in the woods and at every chance I had, and that I did.

I would steal out at night while everyone else slumbered, and I would visit the skull. I would do nothing for hours but bask as it's silent audience, and would pull myself away to arrive home just before anyone else awoke to find me missing.

I would sleep throughout the day while at my brother's bedside as he would fitfully rest beside me. I would primarily awake as he did, erratically throughout the day, due to the nightmares that plagued him at what seemed to be every time he closed his eyes. It was difficult for him to articulate, but I gleaned that his dreams were similar to mine, except he couldn't tell that the skull was his friend and master, he saw only a horror that tormented him waking and dreaming. He was clearly mad to fear it, so I never paid much mind to his gibbering.

I was also given the responsibility to clean and dress his wound. I spent much of that month staring at two things: the skull in the tree, and the gory letter U that was punched into my brother's knee. Every morning I would look at the bloody mess that was my brother's knee, and wipe away

the chunks of blood, pus and skin that seemed to degrade off of him to no end and stare at the perfectly etched letter in his skin. Through the month of Decay that my brother went through before he expired, that letter never lost it's shape, it only seemed to grow bigger, stretching across his leg as he himself withered.

After my brother finally succumbed to his wound something in me changed. The esteem that I had held the skull in vanished, replaced by a revulsion, both towards what I had done and towards it's grotesque imagery. I never returned to that wretched place, nor did I ever explore beyond where no other creature dare tread ever again.

15.

the tower in the woods

By N.G. Burns

Barry passed through the threshold of the old stone tower, running his fingers along the rough hewn stone that made up the structure. He dragged his hand along the wall of the tower as he ascended the rotten, creaking stairs, the aged and weathered stone crumbling off at his touch. He reached the top of the stairs and took a seat on his regular perch.

Barry began to think. Not to say that he didn't possess the ability of thought while not seated upon a balustrade, but to say that this was the place where Barry went to truly contemplate any of the thoughts that were on his mind, and come to conclusions of the questions that life tends to distribute to those fortunate enough to find a nice thinking spot. Questions such as "Why does mankind ceaselessly war", "Why are there still ugly people if no one reproduces with them to carry on their ugly genes?" or "Why is there a 700 year old stone tower inexplicably rooted in the middle of Northern Ontario?". To some questions he found answers, sitting upon

the 700 year old stone tower inexplicably rooted in the middle of Northern Ontario, while to other questions he realized that life sometimes hands you 700 year old stone towers inexplicably rooted in the middle of Northern Ontario and you really shouldn't question it. Barry thought for what he thought were hours before he decided to head back home. Or perhaps he was only up there for minutes. Time is hard to tell when you lack a phone in your pocket, a watch on your wrist, or a flying crap about what goes on outside of your head. Barry had none of these, so he simply walked home whenever he felt he had done some sufficient thinking for the day.

Barry bounded down the damp, groaning stairs, two at a time, eager to get home out of the cold. This proved to be too much for the ancient steps, and upon the last stair, the wood gave a great creak and splintered under Barry's boot, sending him toppling chest first onto the cold stone floor. Barry felt a great shudder from the earth, as if the tower itself were wincing in pain, but wrote it off as simply being brain damage from the fall he took, and decided it best to sleep it off at home.

The next day, when Barry returned to the tower for his daily thinking, he was dismayed to find that the tower was gone from its place upon the hill. In its place, there was a large furrow of disrupted soil dug up in the earth, that stretched away from where the tower once contentedly sat, and stretched through the countryside, all the way past the horizon.

Barry sighed, and thought to himself that he would never find such a good thinking place as that tower ever again. He also thought to himself that he was probably losing his mind and that he ought to go to the hospital to check for a concussion.

16. green

By Anonymous

I have never understood people's obsession with ghosts, or monsters. I lived fourteen years of my life with an abusive mother, who would kick, punch and slap me if she was given half the chance. Growing up, I yearned for the day when a monster would emerge from under my bed and drag me to my death. You see for me, nothing could be worse than living with the daily torment which I did. Simply put, my life was unbearable. Which is why, at age fifteen, I decided to pack my sparse belongings and run away. I waited until my mother was asleep, which on her diet of alcohol and cigarettes never took long, and then I grabbed my ruck-sack and headed out. I didn't leave a note, and I didn't steal anything, I didn't want to give her any reason to come after me.

We lived in a trailer park that backed onto a large wood, and I headed into the trees as soon as I left. I reasoned that this would be a suitable place to spend the night, deeming it foolish to begin walking at dark. I already

had a destination, and a map to get there, but I was in no hurry, I had the rest of my life to make the trip.

The woods were dark, and I had neglected to bring a flashlight. I tripped several times as I headed deeper, wanting to be far enough away so that the half hearted search the trailer park residents probably wouldn't bother conducting would never find me. I walked further and further, until I could barely make out my own hand in front of my face. Branches whipped at me, and every root threatened to snag my foot.

I soon found myself in a clearing, and began to prepare a space to sleep, but something caught my eye. Just on the border of the clearing, lay a trailer. It was a typical, if somewhat outdated, trailer-home. The darkness made it hard to see, but the trailer looked long abandoned, moss grew all over it, and it was sunk slightly into the ground. I was delighted at having found a shelter for the night, and it seemed my luck was already picking up. I headed over, and pulled at the door. The metal was warped, and wouldn't budge. I bent down to find a large stick, intending to use it as a pry-bar. I found one that was suitable, and, with a little resistance from the weeds that held it, I pulled it free. It took a few tries but the door finally came open. I squeezed through, into the dark interior of the trailer. Inside, it was even darker than out, and the branches and the weeds had inexplicably found their way inside, and brushed at my face as I felt my way through. I found the bed, and still blind, I lay down, hoping I wasn't lying next to a wasps nest, or something equally dangerous.

I awoke to a coldness on my face, and, after a mini heart attack, I realized it was just moss. I spat a few times, the taste of it filled my mouth. The light was still poor, and it took me a few seconds to realize I was not alone. There was a seating area, just a few steps away from me, and a figure occupied one of the places. My eyes soon adjusted to the light, revealing the true horror of the situation.

The trailer was largely overgrown, with roots and branches and moss forcing themselves through the tiniest holes in the ceiling. A panel of metal

was missing from behind the seats, and the figure was on its way to falling through. The person was long dead, and the decaying corpse looked to be part of the wildlife that was forcing itself through the gap. The body was wrapped in vines, with moss growing out of the mouth. The eyes were long gone, and roots snaked inside the empty sockets. I froze up, horrified at the sight, and, even as I stood there, I felt a vine or a root, ever so slowly, tickling, at the back of my neck...

17. unbearable

By Anonymous

I guess you could call me a collector. When I was little, I collected stuffed animals. In particular, my favorite was a little stuffed teddy bear that I always used to sleep with. Then, when I got older, it went on the shelf with all the others. When I entered my teenage years, I started collecting figurines. The usual stuff, like anime figurines, but I wasn't a typical Japanophile and collected other kinds as well. I think it started when my uncle gave me his collection of Star Wars toys. If you accused me of being a nerd, I'd have to plead guilty, but it was a harmless little hobby. Or so I thought.

One day, I was clearing off shelf space for some new resin models I'd just painted, so I moved the last of my stuffed animals into the closet. I hesitated when I got to my favorite bear, but he too went in with the rest of them. It was silly to feel guilty over something as simple as that, but nostalgia has a funny way of controlling your emotions, just ask anyone who's ever had a favorite toy. Anyway, the next morning, when I woke up, the bear was

on the floor in front of the closet. I didn't think much of it at the time, my plush toys were packed so tight in there it must have slipped and fallen down. I returned it to its place and went about my day as usual. But the next morning, it happened again, so this time I firmly wedged the bear between two others and closed the closet door. So imagine my surprise when it happened yet again.

I went straight into my older brother's room and told him to quit going through my stuff, but he just gave me a puzzled look and said he hadn't. He was always borrowing something or another from me, so I didn't believe him, but I left it at that. After two more mornings of finding that damn bear on the floor again, I figured he was just screwing with me and told him to knock it off. Again, he protested and proclaimed his innocence, but I didn't believe him for a second. Once, when I was five and he was ten, he hid underneath my bed at night after I thought he'd gone to sleep and started making the most godawful heavy, gurgly breathing sounds. I lay there petrified until I couldn't take it anymore and leaped out of my bed and through the door, screaming for my mom and dad. The little brat couldn't stop laughing even as my parents lectured and scolded him.

So getting thoroughly fed up with his stupid joke, I took the bear downstairs and crammed it into the box where we kept our holiday decorations. It seemed to look up at me reproachfully as I tucked it under some ornaments and lights, leaving it with only a plastic witch for company. And would you believe it, the next morning it was on the floor in my room once more. I was getting sick of this, so I complained to my mom. She just laughed it off and said she would talk to my brother. In the meantime, I decided I was tired of moving the wretched thing and left it where it was. Later that night, I could have sworn I heard a noise a few hours after I'd gotten into bed, a sort of shuffling sound. I sat up and looked at the floor and was horrified to see what looked like a tiny shape walking in the darkness. I quickly turned on my bedside lamp and saw the bear lying on the floor... but not where I'd left it. I was getting paranoid now, but I figured it was

just some dumb nightmare brought on by having to deal with my brother's persistent prank, so I hurriedly grabbed the thing and tossed it unceremoniously on the closet floor, shutting the door and barricading it with my bookbag.

The next day after school, I went straight to my room and looked around. No bear on the floor. I opened the closet door and it fell out as if it had been propped up against it. I'm not proud to admit this, but I jumped. I went to my mom to complain again, and she told me that my brother still denied everything, but he'd promised her he wouldn't mess with me anymore anyway. Then she started to talk to me about the bear that was giving me all this trouble. She said when I was little, I'd refuse to sleep without it, crying non-stop unless it was tucked in with me, but I would always toss it out of my crib in the middle of the night and they'd find it on the floor nearby. Hesitantly, I tried telling her about the night I thought I heard and saw the bear walking around my room, but now her face grew concerned and she said she wondered if she shouldn't send me to counseling. I protested her extreme reaction, saying I was fine, I just needed a good night's sleep and to stop having this plush toy ruin my life. She left things at that, but I realized I was getting older now, and I couldn't rely on my parents to solve all my problems for me anymore.

But the next morning... oh, the next morning, remembering it still sends chills down my spine. I woke again to find the bear on the floor, only this time it was much closer to the bed. And laying beside it was a knife from the kitchen. Nothing cliché like a big butcher knife, but a lightweight, sharp, slender thing that a small stuffed bear could easily hold... if it could grip anything with those tiny paws. Heart racing, I jumped out of bed and snatched the knife away, half expecting the thing to grab the knife and attack me, but of course, nothing happened. I'd never seen it move during the daytime, and in fact, I wasn't sure I'd really seen it move at all, but this was too much. I was going to give my brother hell, but then I remembered that since it was the weekend, he was spending the night with some friends like

he always did. Neither of my parents would have carried on such a sick joke for this long. There was only one thing left to do.

“I’ve had enough of this, and I’ve had enough of you.” I told the fuzzy little bastard. “This ends now.” And with that, I tore his head off. I tore the head off my beloved childhood bear and felt only satisfaction. But I wasn’t finished yet, I gutted him and ripped all the stuffing out. Then I got two plastic bags and sealed the remains up tight before throwing them in the trash can outside. No more would I be terrorized by a toy, or at least that’s what I thought. All throughout the night I was nervous and I couldn’t sleep. When I finally passed out close to daylight, my final thoughts were of the seemingly sad expression in those cold black eyes as I had tied those plastic bags and thrown away my former friend. When I woke up, I searched the room frantically, but there was no bear in sight. And the next day, it was the same, no bear. I was able to sleep peacefully at last. It really must have been a stupid prank my brother was pulling, but now the fun was over.

On the third night, however, my worst fears, fears I never could have imagined, manifested themselves for the final time. I was dead to the world in the dark of the night when I was suddenly woken by what sounded like little whispery words. I thought I heard a voice say “I could have saved you. But now it’s too late.” Horrified, I bolted upright to see what looked like the head of my bear floating in black space. Suppressing a scream, I reached for the light, and watched as the bear’s head was seemingly crushed by a dark, giant hand. My own hand fell away from the lightswitch in shock. I gazed upward at a shadowy figure that had to be at least ten feet tall, maybe more. I clicked on the light and immediately wished I hadn’t. A gruesome, shadowy form was towering over my bed, but before I could get a good look at it, the light went off again. Shivering in terror and hugging my knees, rocking back and forth, I tried to convince myself it was a dream and that I would soon wake up. I saw the crushed head of my beloved bear on the floor, gazing up at me, full of sorrow. I thought about my parents and my brother and wondered if they, when they found my body the next morning, would blame the bear that had been trying so desperately to protect me.

18. don't look back

By Anonymous

I was taking a vacation in Fiji with my friend and his family. We were having lots of fun and eventually his dad told us a story about the road we were on while we were driving to the beach. It looked pretty genuine, it was an old road with flat land around it but there was a ditch on one side of the road about a meter wide and a meter and a half deep with a little stream of water flowing through it.

His father continued to tell us about a girl who walked along the road every day to get to school. She was described as beautiful by everyone around her and she always wore a long skirt. One day however, she went missing and nobody knew where she'd gone.

It took people five days to find her and when they did they found her inside that ditch by the road, her body mutilated and raped. Her head completely missing. The police did their usual drill putting tape around the area of the body and her body was brought to forensics to figure out when she

died. When they went to bring the body from the car however, it was missing.

They went looking for the body again, only to find it in the exact position it'd been in before, aligned within the tape. The investigators were creeped out, but decided to just haul the body back. The body went missing again and of course they found it at that spot again. They were stumped, and after many attempts the officers decided to give up.

Later on during the day, after loads of fun on the beach, the night was pitch black and we were approaching that road again. We saw a girl walking on the side of the road with the ditch. She was beautiful and wore a long skirt. She had short hair too which wasn't really my thing but it fitted her. My friend's dad must have been checking her out too, in a different way. His eyes were widened and he told us all not to look behind as we passed her.

I couldn't help myself. I had to get another look at her. I turned around and what I saw was a woman's battered body with no head.

19.

the experiment

By Anonymous

7/16: This is day one of our experiment, and as such nothing eventful has occurred. Patient was delivered as scheduled and transferred to their cell. I have high hopes for this experiment and am proud to be a part of it. We are going to change the world.

-update: at approximately 10:45 PM, patient flew into a seemingly spontaneous rage, and set to work attacking the walls of his cell, screaming all the while. It is now 1:37 AM, and he has finally calmed down.

7/17: First day of testing for patient. The results on the response to auditory stimuli were amazing, no one had correctly predicted the outcome. The patient was completely unresponsive to sound of any kind apart from extremely low frequencies at high volumes, the vibrations from which seemed to cause the patient some distress, as he became very jumpy for several hours after the test. The patient did not strike at his caretakers when they slid food through the slot in his door, he actually sprinted to the opposite side of the

room and just sat there, cowering for several minutes before deciding it was safe to try to eat.

-update, caretakers have a nasty mess to clean up, one of them accidentally smacked the handle of their mop against the door, startling the patient. I believe the term is “scared shitless”?

7/18: Patient is no longer displaying yesterday’s strange behavior. Some members of the team have hypothesized that he is relating the vibrations to earthquakes on his homeworld, but I don’t agree with this. I believe he may be associating the vibrations with those produced by some manner of predator. We cannot say for certain. No testing today, the shipment of animals did not come in.

7/19: the testing was wonderful today! We had three different animals to test with; a rabbit, a pig, and a deer. As expected, the patient caught the rabbit with ease, chasing it down and grabbing it with enough force to crack the spine. Before it could eat the rodent, we administered a painful shock. We did not want it to lose it’s appetite. Next was the pig. I don’t think the patient was used to seeing (used figuratively, of course) an animal that had the balls to try to fight back. He certainly didn’t like it very much, he let out a scream that was painful to hear and jumped on the hog, jabbing his long “sixth finger” (for clarification, the sixth finger is not actually a finger, rather, it is a very long claw protruding from the side of the hand near the pinky) straight into a spot somewhere on the back of the pigs head, it looked to be just under the ear. This punctured the animal’s brain, killing It quickly as the claw moved around inside its head. Again, we shocked the patient and sent in the next animal. The deer did not make it very far at all, as the patient was in a considerably dangerous mood after being shocked and attacked by animals totally alien to it. He charged the deer at a considerable speed, stumbling and flailing on four legs, dispatching the deer in seconds. I have taken note of the patient’s choice of movement, as such a clumsy and uncomfortable looking way of running seems unusual for a bipedal, humanoid organism.

7/20: Today we tested the patient's sense of smell. As I predicted, his olfactory skills are remarkable. His nose perfectly fills the roles of his missing ears and eyes, which makes perfect sense. It would be a great deal stranger if he completely lacked a sense of smell, which would give the patient a grand total of only two senses through which he could form his idea of his environment. He seemed drawn to the smell of blood especially, but, strangely, he would actually go to a source emitting the scent of trees rather than to the blood source. This is more evidence in support of my theory that the patient is a tree dweller, similar to many of earth's simians, as well as my theory that my coworkers really don't know very much about anything at all. The patient has been displaying odd behavior since the end of the olfactory test, screaming and howling endlessly. It has not stopped since then, and continues even as I write this.

7/21: Something has happened. There are facility guards stationed outside my bedroom, and they will not allow me to pass. They say a door malfunction occurred on floor -36 B. Anything housed on that floor is currently loose, and thus it is not safe to leave my room. Not that I mind, it's quite a large room, you could probably fit something five or six times the size of the patient in here without even noticing it was there. I'm sure I'll find something to do.

-update, the patient is dead. I was sitting in my room when I noticed a sound coming from the air duct in the ceiling. I grabbed the .45 handgun that is required to be carried by all staff in case of an incident like this one. There was a loud clanging from within the duct, accompanied by tearing metal. Before I could say "have mercy", I was standing face to face with the patient. He was in my bedroom, and he looked hungry. I drew my handgun and pointed it straight at his head, and he let out a low hiss. He almost looked scared. But then I noticed his leg muscles tighten up, about to pounce, and I shot him in the head until i was certain he would not get up. I was so relieved, I don't think I'd ever felt that scared. I fell back and leaned against the wall behind me. I just sat there in shock for a while. I was

safe. Funny though, how I'd never noticed how much the vibrating of the air conditioning sounded so much like the low frequency note the patient had been so afraid of.

And I could swear that the wall had never been this close. My bedroom was quite a large room.

20. the basement

By Anonymous

During my sophomore year in college at WVU, which I was attending at the same time as my cousin Adam, he started dating a girl who told us after a night of drinking that she didn't want to go home that weekend because her parents were out of town and she didn't like being alone at home. Why?, we all asked. "Because my house is possessed by a demon or something.." she said, very matter-of-factly. Of course we ALL had a good laugh at her expense and called her bullshit immediately. She got very defensive, almost to the point of tears, because nobody ever believed her and her parents won't let anyone talk about it. She lives in a mansion in a very nice development about an hour away from school.

Partly to calm her down and partly because we were all very curious about it now, we decided that she would be going home that weekend and we would come with her, we being myself, my girlfriend Michele, Adam and the girl.

The next day we showed up in the evening, roughly 7pm. The first thing we noticed was that the house was completely empty, her parents were out of town and they had no pets. (because they kept running away, she said. She didn't act like she thought the demon was the cause of the animals disappearances, but I sure did, but i kept that to myself.)

All the lights in the house were on, from the garage to the attic. Given that her parents had been gone for at least a night by now, this was very strange. They should have been off. Walking into the house, she asked us if we'd like a beer. We all said yes, needing a bit of liquid courage if we were to continue our little investigation and make it through the night.

Walking into the kitchen, we came upon yet another cliché moment in every story, I was doubtful, but there it was, right before our eyes.

Every, and I mean every, cabinet, drawer and door was open in the kitchen, including the refrigerator, which was completely empty.

The 3 of us who had never been here before were completely speechless, practically frozen in place. She just sighed, said "Yep, this is what I was talking about. We have to keep all our food in the garage refrigerator because this one will never stay closed." Just like that, like it was a normal, everyday inconvenience. She went out to the garage and sure enough, all their food and drinks were kept out here. She walked back into the kitchen and started closing all the drawers and cabinets, using both her arms and her legs, like it was something she had done 1000 times before. It was at this point a very strong feeling of discomfort and, dread settled over the 3 of us. I walked around the island in the middle of the kitchen and came upon a broken plate on the ground. I said something about it, and began to clean it up when the girl came out of the garage, telling me "No, don't worry about cleaning that up, it will just break another one if you do." Wow, I thought, as I dropped the piece of plate as if it were suddenly a giant snake I held in my hand.

"I have some scratches below my window if you guys want to go check those out, upstairs in my room." Sure, we thought, suddenly quite happy to

leave the kitchen. As the rest of the group left in front of me, I turned back and grabbed as many pieces of the plate as I could and threw them in the trash, just to test and see what was really going on around here.

We climbed the steps and went in to her room, a typical room by all standards, and went straight to the window. Sure enough, right below the frame were 3 very deep, fairly thick scratches. Although I wasn't 100% they were from something supernatural, they were very strangely placed for any animal.

As we were left the room and headed back towards the stairs, we all jumped as we heard a loud CRASH!

As you may have already guessed, when we walked back into the kitchen, all the cabinets and drawers were open again, and lo and behold, a new plate was lying broken on the floor (one that was from the other side of the kitchen, an antique crystal plate) which upset her greatly, as she said it had never broken any of the expensive plates, it always used plates that were near that place on the floor.

At this point we were all terrified, everyone was complaining about feeling watched, not wanting to be alone, and we were all feeling that sinking gut feeling, and we were all just generally freaked out. We'd been there a few hours, I believe the time was close to midnight when I checked.

It was then that she dropped the biggest bomb of the evening on us. Before we had come on this trip, she had mentioned a pool table, and my cousin wanted to go shoot some pool to lighten the mood. She spun around on us very quickly, and with a deathly serious look she told us that we can't do that because the pool table is in the basement and it's too close to midnight. Nobody can go in the basement past midnight.

Bullshit, we called. What do you mean, we can't go in the basement? We can walk right down the steps!

No, she replied. You can't make it all the way down, I'm serious. It's like something will stop you a few steps from the bottom, but trust me, it's so scary down there you won't want to go down.

Now, at that moment, the smart thing to do would have been to acknowledge that she was right and put the idea out of our heads, but instead, fueled by the liquid courage we had been vigorously consuming to help with our anxiety, we decided that the men shall go on while the girls stay and watch.

We walked over to the basement door, and as soon as we opened it a large gust of air roared up the stairs and blew through our hair and faces. The strange thing was that it smelled fresh, like air coming in through a window on a summers day. The lights were off, and the switch at the top of the steps did nothing. She told us there was a pull string light off to the right of the landing, but we'd never make it that far. For visual purposes, there were about 8 steps down, not including the top landing.

We began our descent, side-by-side in typical cuz-bro fashion.

First step: Nothing.

Second step: we begin to hear what sounds like the chain on the bottom of the pull-switch being swing in circles, like someone is holding the bottom and swinging it around.

Third Step: Scraping sounds, like metal being drug over concrete, way off from the darkness in the back of the basement.

Fourth step: We were completely terrified, I could feel Adam shaking beside me and I'm sure he could feel me doing the same thing. We were so scared that he whispered over to me, so that the girls standing at the top of the stairs wouldn't hear, that we should just quit, and we needed to go back to the top of the stairs, now.

I disagreed though, tell him we are more manly than that. To prove my point, I yelled out "We're coming for you fucker! You won't be able to stop us!" or something to that effect. The scraping sound amplified at this, and the cord that was being swung began to sound more and more violent, like it was being jerked around.

Fifth step: We left the relative safety of the light coming from the top of the steps, the walls of the stairwell stopped and we were partially surrounded by the darkness of the basement. Immediately what felt like cold

fingers began tracing along our exposed arms and legs, like we were being air-tickled. I asked Adam if he felt that, to which he replied yes, with a shaky, trembling voice.

Sixth Step: By this point, we decided just to reach down and touch the seventh step so we could say that we did and be done with it. A LOUD thud echoed around us, like someone slamming their fist against drywall. As we reached down to touch our toes to the 7th step, we felt what felt like an air pocket, I don't really know how to describe it, it was like trying to push your toe through a water balloon, and it prevented us from touching the step.

I was frustrated, terrified and my cousin was the same, we were both putting full force into trying to touch our toes to the steps. I yelled out "WE'RE HERE FUCKER, WE AREN'T AFRAID OF YOU AND WE WON'T LEAVE TILL WE TOUCH THIS STEP!!" ..charming, I know, but as the last word left my mouth it was as if the rug were pulled out from under our feet and we slammed into the 7th step so hard we lost our footing, Adam grabbed me while I tried to grab him and we both ended up on our backs sliding towards the darkness of the basement.

We caught ourselves with our feet against the basement floor, and at this point we were absolutely terrified, my heart was beating so fast I was afraid I was going to pass out and be left down there. "WE NEED TO GO!" we both screamed as we started to scramble up the steps. At this point the lightbulb with the cord hanging down was swung so hard it smashed against the ceiling, sending glass everywhere and a large paint-can came flying from the darkness and crashed against the concrete floor in front of us. Paint splattered everywhere. The loud bangs on the walls continued all around us, moving down the wall towards the stairs, and towards us. We scrambled up the stairs on our hands and knees, and I heard my cousin cry out in pain. He yelled something to the effect of, "IT'S GOT ME!" and screamed in pure terror. I grabbed his arm and practically dead-pulled him up the stairs, where the girls slammed the door shut behind us, the light cord still swinging, the wall still banging and paint cans still scraping the

ground. As the basement door slammed shut, we heard LOUD, and I mean loud, like a piledriver coming up the stairs, footsteps running up the stairs and as they reach the top there was a very large, very loud BANG against the door. The girls start screamed, my cousin and I sat frozen in terror, but know one thing. It's time to leave.

After that we leave, locking the front door on our way out. When I say we leave, I mean that we all run, with full speed to the car and drive all the way back to college. Did not look back. After we had time, we checked my cousins back and sure enough on his lower back were 3 very deep scratches, exactly like the ones that were under the girls window in her room.

About a week after this, the girl gets a call from her parents saying that that "thing" they won't talk about has been getting worse and worse since our stay there and they can't take it anymore, they are staying in a hotel until they can move. Two days after that call, she got another call that said the house had burnt down.

They were immediately investigated for arson, as it was seen coincidental that they happened to be staying at a hotel for no reason when the fire happened. They were ultimately cleared and the cause of the fire was discovered.

The gas line to the water heater and furnace had been pulled from the wall IN THE BASEMENT. They estimated the fire had been started sometime after midnight, around 1AM.

My cousin broke up with the girl shortly after this happened, she practically had a breakdown and had to start staying at Chestnut Ridge (mental facility in Morgantown). We've never gone back to even look at the place it stood because we were afraid it would attach to us, and believe it may be what drove her crazy.

21. dog days

By B.A. Redenbacher

If I'm going to start out with anything, it should be this: It's easy to disprove something you don't want to be true. If there is anything to be learned from this whole awful thing, it's that. It really is too easy to disprove what you aren't willing to believe in.

That's why it took me so long to come to terms with what I have learned. It's true, every word, and I've always known that it was true but I just didn't want it to be.

When I first heard about the Grant county disappearances, I wasn't shocked. A few too many kids go missing over too short of a time, and you've got yourself a serial killer or a pedophile or both. That's just the way the world is. You take the good, you take the bad.

It was the dog days of summer. Heat makes people crazy. It stands to reason that it would make already crazy people even crazier. Maybe even crazy enough to kidnap half a dozen suburban kids all within a block of their own

home. No, when I heard about the missing kids, I wasn't shocked at all.

That doesn't mean I wasn't interested, though. I run a news website, after all, and as much as I despise sensationalist journalism, running an article or two on a recent string of child kidnappings was too good an opportunity too good to pass up.

The police had turned up little, and revealed even less. Eye-witness interviews had at best turned up nothing and at worst given way to a few crackpots ranting or raving about some mothman conspiracy type shit. People described eagles, giant bats, or even winged demons fluttering in the evening or morning sky around the time of the abductions.

The police made note of it, but understandably blamed it on a combination of large birds, drug use, and overactive imagination.

Besides bizarre reports of unidentified flying creatures in the sky around dusk or dawn, the kidnappings had two other things in common: the missing children were all between the ages of 5 and 7, and they were apparently lured from their backyards towards a dense wooded area while playing. There were never any signs of struggle.

With that whole lot of nothing, imagine what getting some exclusive info on the case could do for a guy like me. Web journalists are a dime a dozen, but one good article is all you need to achieve overnight success. So when I get a call from a friend of mine explaining that the family of Joanne Suthers was finally ready to talk, I leap at the chance.

Joanne was the 6 year old daughter of Marshall and Louise Suthers. She was the third to disappear, and the first to be found. I don't feel like thinking about that, though.

I met them in their home one sultry September day. We were in the living room when they spoke at length about their daughter's life and the events leading up to her disappearance.

They were nice people. I know, that's what they all say about every poor soul whom sudden tragedy befalls. A meth addicted, spouse-abusing neo-nazi could have his daughter vanish in the night, and you'd hear his neigh-

bors on the evening news the next day blathering on about how he was a good man once you got to know him. It's a cliché and disgusting aspect of the human condition, this habit of overlooking our empathy in response to misfortune. I've never liked it or bought into it, so when I say they were nice people, you know it's the truth.

I could see the sorrow in their eyes as they described her playing in the back garden, just before dinner. It had rained recently, and her little yellow goulashes squeaked with every step on the pavement of their patio. I could feel the regret and anguish in their voices as they admitted to looking away, for just a minute, to use the restroom and answer the phone. They were both on the verge of tears when they explained that she hadn't come back in for dinner, that the back garden was empty and the back gate had been opened, and that they couldn't see their daughter anywhere on the edge of the forest.

Louise Suthers broke down into sobbing at that point, and her husband consoled her and explained through his own tears that all the police discovered two days later was a single yellow goulash at the edge of the woods.

They were nice people. They loved their daughter, and they didn't deserve to have her taken from them. I'm still not completely happy that they got her back, though.

I know that sounds awful, but even when I first got the news I didn't like the way it sounded. I looked at the facts. Six children went missing, only the middlemost of which are found again. When these two children are discovered, they are naked and within walking distance of their family's home. Examinations turn up no signs of sexual abuse or forced confinement, no broken bones, no bruises, no scrapes, not even a scratch on them. No one sees where the kids came from, who dropped them off or how. The children similarly claim no memory of their own abductions, confinements, or release. Call me a cynic or a pessimist, but that just doesn't happen. I wanted to know why or how those kids both showed back up unharmed. It was all just too perfect, too happy. Back then, I knew we didn't live in the kind of

world where kidnapped kids showed up fine and dandy 2 months after they went missing. The world we live in was the kind of place where kids don't show back up, or if they do they're butchered and left in some dumpsters by the docks. I wish I still thought that was the kind of world we live in; a world where all kids and parents have to worry about are pedophiles and kidnapers. I'd rather live there.

Anyway, I started hiking in the woods. I'd pass by some old police tape every once in a while, examine the spots where Joanne's goulash was found, pass by the abduction sites once or twice. Mostly I would just wander through the woods for a few hours a day. But just like the paid forensics specialists that came before me, I turned up nothing even resembling a lead.

I didn't stop, though. When Hike 1 turned up jack shit, I took Hike 2. Hike 2 was a bust, so I went on Hike 3. By Hike 30, I had confidence that I'd surpassed the dedication and scrutiny of a CSI unit. That may be an over statement of my own abilities, but I did finally realize something.

It was during Hike 35 that I first noticed them. There had always been a dull buzzing sound around dawn and dusk, and occasionally I'd step on a fallen shell, but that was normal for cicadas. I had always been aware of them, but that night I noticed something odd. Those insects seemed to congregate around the areas where children had been abducted. They were there all night, loudly and hypnotically buzzing away. During the day, however, there was nothing but your standard ambient sound. They seemed to vanish every morning, just before sun up. Cicadas normally remain in one area for long periods of time, then just move on to another. To come and go from one spot frequently over a short period of time is unusual behavior for them. I asked myself where they went during the day.

I started lingering near these areas, and paying close attention to those bugs. They seemed to spend the night in a few trees on the edge of the forest, then they'd all fly off deeper into the woods. Some nights, they stayed in one spot, other nights they spent in other trees. As I focused more and more on the cicadas, I noticed a sort of pattern in their behavior, and something

else.

I noticed this faint smell, something sweet and nostalgic, kind of like cotton candy at a county fair.

After a while, I accepted that I had to follow them. The idea was frightening, both for the perceived threat to my own life and for what it painted me as. If I went through with this, I realized I'd be some crackpot with a website following bugs around in a dark forest, stumbling on the trail of loudly humming insects. It took me a while, but eventually I did it.

I had to, for the story.

I heard their buzz lift itself from the trees and start drifting off, and I jogged after them, always waiting for them to pick up again from whichever tree they stopped at along the way. There were always a few stragglers, and they were loud as hell, so it wasn't all too difficult to track the drove of chittering insects, even through the woods an hour before sun-rise.

Here and there, I would catch a glimpse of the swarm in action, swooping through the darkness of the woods. Without any light and with the paranoia of being alone in the woods contorting my thoughts, they sometimes seemed like one solid mass, one great big bug, buzzing through the empty oak forest on massive wings.

The whole time, I breathed in that smell, and felt their chirping in my ears. It was unsettling, but I didn't falter. I couldn't afford to.

The more I think about it, the less sure I am of why I invested so much time into those bugs. I think I probably expected them to lead me to some evidence, or thought that their behavior patterns would reveal something about the kidnappings. I realize now how crazy that must seem, and I can't understand why I did it. There was just something about those bugs, something tempting and uncertain, maybe even suspicious.

They ended up heading deep, deep into the woods, far beyond where any trail lay. They started circling a certain tree for about a minute, and then congregated in its branches. Then, they fell silent.

Quietly, I started my approach. At first it was out of nervousness, but after

I realized I was being startled by a swarm of harmless bugs, I rationalized that I was just trying not to spook the insects away.

I remember asking myself “Why this tree?” over and over as I circled it in the dark. I didn’t know anything about cicadas then. Hell, I was happy just to remember what they were called.

I had no idea why they might choose to congregate in one specific tree. The more I focused on it, and adjusted my eyes to the dark of the woods, the odder the tree started to seem. I glanced at the other trees, and they were similar enough, of course. They were almost exactly alike, in fact, but I felt like there was something off about it, something I just couldn’t place.

I reached out my hand and gently wrapped on the bark of the tree. I heard a dull buzz from above, but kept my cool. I glanced up, and the bugs shifted slightly in the branches, before settling down again.

I settled down, too, and wrapped on the pale bark again. It took me a while of circling and prodding, but eventually, I puzzled it out. I wrapped my hand against the bark one more time, and listened closely. Hollow.

It was dead, the whole tree, maybe, or just a large portion of the trunk. It was dead, and hollowed out.

It didn’t look so terribly dead, mind you; otherwise I would’ve noticed right away. It had shed a lot of leaves and dried up a bit, sure, and the bark was a little paler than it should have been, but it didn’t look so dead. It still had some leaves.

I braced myself against the tree and pushed myself up somewhat, getting a closer look at the insect-lined branches.

They weren’t leaves. Looking close, I realized they were hundreds of cicada shells, caked together in mosaic patterns all along the tree’s bark and branches. In varying stages of disintegration or decay, sitting side by side with the still living, but dormant cicadas.

The police hadn’t mentioned this, and I guessed it was probably just some weird natural phenomena, okay to overlook in a police report or news article.

Then my hand went through the bark.

I pressed too hard in the wrong spot, and my hand went straight through the brittle bark. First I felt it snap, and then I heard the crunch. It was like peanut brittle. I felt dust and something rough and raspy, and panicked.

I pulled my hand out. It was covered in powdered chitin and exoskeleton. I stared at the fragments of shells and husks, tiny abrasive feet clinging to me here and there, a few pairs of hollow eyes starting out into darkness. I shuddered slightly, and then dusted my hand off on my jeans.

Curiously, I gazed into the hole I had so easily made in the tree. It was too dark to make much of anything out, so I peeled back some more bark.

There was crunching and snapping, and the more I peeled away, the more sure I became that the innards of the tree were composed almost entirely of the molted exoskeletons of thousands or millions of cicadas.

Amazing, and terrifying, I thought. I wished I had brought my camera along, I remember thinking as I peered further inside. There it was.

A single yellow goulash, to complete a matching set with the one in a police evidence locker back in the Nash County sheriff's office.

My eyes were wide as dinner plates then. I heard the dull buzz of the cicadas above. They weren't bothered, it seemed, but my prying and crunching had started to disturb them.

In spite of this, I couldn't stop there. I had to dig deeper.

I pulled the bark back further, and saw more and more: a raincoat here, a pair of suspenders there, a hat, a tennis shoe or two.

All of these things, sized for children.

The tree was half dismantled when I saw her. Clear as day, she lay there, seemingly asleep amidst a woven tapestry of hollow bug remains: Joanne Suthers.

I reached through the crunching cicada skin, reaching out to her naked, eerie figure, suspended in a tree made more of skin and chirping insects than out of wood and bark. I felt the pincers and feet of those shells cling to my skin, as though they were trying to pull me back or push me away, but I

couldn't be stopped by any number of empty insect shells. I heard the dull drone of the swarm above my head as it started to pick up again, but I was unable to process it at the time.

I reached out to Joanne's form, and I grasped her small brown hand in mine, and felt it crunch and turn to dust in my hand.

That was all it took, I suppose. The bugs realized first and swarmed up. For a minute I thought I'd pissed them off, that they'd bleed me dry with their tiny pincer mouths and then use my hollowed out shell to plug up the holes I'd knocked in their nightmare tree. But they didn't. They just swarmed above my head, and then darted off into the forest.

I was so surprised by my continued existence that I didn't feel the tree shift until it was already practically on top of me.

Had it been anything more than empty skin and brittle bark, I would've died right there. I would've died and probably been happier for it.

It collapsed onto me, having been tampered with in just the wrong way and unable to support its own weight any longer. It fell onto me and crunched all over. I was covered in the dust of a million hollow husks as I rose out of the rubble of the tree. Joanne, or her remains, or her molt, or whatever it was, had crumbled to dust. I could see the color of her skin among the dust of shells. Here and there I saw other shades of skin tone; I assumed those had belonged to the shells of other children, hidden away in the tree.

I didn't get a good look at them. A gust of wind picked up the dusty skins and husks and powders and scattered them across the forest like dandelion seeds.

It didn't matter in the end. I decided to leave the child-husks out of my police report. A week of intense on-and-off questioning later and the sheriff department had decided that I was innocent of any crime related to the abductions, and that the suspect must have been disposing of the evidence in these hollowed out trees.

I know better. I wish I didn't, but I do. I can't tell the police. I can't tell the

parents of those kids. I can't bare the thought of explaining to 4 sets of parents that they may never see their kid's face again because of a swarm of insects. I especially can't stand the idea of telling one particular set of parents that whatever they're raising may or may not be their daughter, but I know one thing for certain, ever since I saw that hollow, molted shell:

It isn't human anymore, if it ever was to begin with.

22.

in heaven waiting to die

By Anonymous

This is the final report of the exploration vessel Halo 7, my name is Donald Stevens, my father's name is Frank Stevens and my mother is Judy Stevens. If this report reaches earth, please don't let them hear this. Tell them I died a heroic death, trying to save the earth.

On 23rd December 2056, a black hole opened up, just inside our solar system. Scientists calculated that by 2070, our planet would be consumed by it. On March 9th 2061, a team was assembled for a mission into space. A mission to explore the black hole.

February 4th, 2062. The exploration ship Halo7, and its crew of six, blasted off from a military base just south of Walton, Texas. We slept on board the ship for 2 years, four months, and three days.

June 7th, 2064. Our crew was awakened by the ships' computer, as planned. However, after consulting said computer, our navigator, Adam, realised that we were too close to the black hole. We calculated that within

the next twenty-four hours, we would be pulled into it. We spent our last hours trying to override the computer's auto piloting systems, in the hopes we could manually turn around.

In the last minutes of June 7th 2064, our ship was caught in the gravitational pull of the black hole, I hid in my bunk, strapped down with anything I could find.

Unknown date, of an unknown year. I woke up still on the ship, with white light flooding in through the windows. I searched for the crew, but to no avail. Eventually, with reluctance, I donned my spacesuit, and walked out into the unknown.

I think it was a planet, though I'm not sure. The ground was completely flat, and completely white. As far as the eye could see, there was stuff. It's hard to put it any other way than that. There were some houses, some beaches, classic cars, and even a massive stage, like from a concert. But no people. I waited for a while, but nothing happened, everything was the same. So I decided to walk.

I walked, and walked, and walked. For years, hundreds of years. Or maybe it was merely minutes. Time seemed to mean nothing here. All I know is I walked. I walked until I forgot about the spaceship, forgot about my mission, forgot about the crew. My life was the walk. I never tired, or got hungry, or bored, and I figured out early on I could breathe without my spacesuit. I was content to walk, and walk I did. But then I saw something, something I thought I'd never see again. A person. I walked closer, and saw that it was one of the crew. It was Alice, one of the mechanics.

Although it took me a while to remember how to speak, I eventually did, and we hugged each other.

Alice was sitting in what looked like a living room, there was a blazing fire and cat curled up on the sofa. It looked nice. I spoke to her, I remember exactly what we said.

I asked her. 'Alice, what is this place? Where are we?' And she replied.

'Donald, don't you see? We're in heaven' We chatted for a while, and she

told me that everything I'd seen, everything I'd walked past, was someone's heaven. I accepted this, and she told me she'd walked for a long time to find hers, and, if I continued walking, I would eventually find mine.

And so I walked again. For longer this time, much longer. I think. Sure enough though, I found my heaven. It was a very generic idea of heaven. There were hot, bubbling springs, pleasant music, and lots of wonderful food. I imagined things, and they came. I restored cars, and built myself a house. I recorded an entire CD, I rode horses and read and slept for as long as I wanted. I tried to imagine a companion once, but it didn't work.

I spent an eternity there. A thousand times the time I spent walking. Simply put, it was heaven. I didn't age, I didn't get sick, and the only time I got hungry was when I wished for it, so I could enjoy the food more. But I was still human, and I became lonely. I became bored. I longed for human contact. For an argument, for a fight, for anything. And so, after spending millions of life-times in my beautiful heaven, I decided to leave it all behind. I decided to walk back, to find Alice, to talk to her. The walk was long and short, but I made it back to that living room. Only, it was empty. Alice was gone, although there were various things she'd imagined all around. I cried then, just sat down and cried. I didn't know it was possible to cry in heaven.

As I sat there and cried, an idea formed in my head. Maybe this place wasn't heaven. Maybe, somewhere out there, earth still existed. Maybe I wasn't dead. Maybe, just maybe, I could return home. I walked away from my heaven, and away from Alice's. I was going to return to the ship.

I walked once more, praying it would be the last time I had to. Eventually, the ship came into view. It was so imperfect, so beautiful. I climbed on board, and tried to start it up. I tried, and I tried. But nothing worked. I sat in the ship for a while, gazing at all the screens and buttons, when I noticed something. I was hungry. I was hungry, and I hadn't wished for it. I felt excitement build up in my stomach. I thought of a sandwich, like I had done a million times before, but nothing happened. No sandwich appeared. And so, with this on my mind, I decided what I'd do.

A few minutes ago I found out how to work this thing, though I've no idea if it's going to get back to earth or not. Please, if your receiving this, tell my family I love them, though not what I'm doing, I don't want them to know how I die. By 2070, our earth will be consumed by a black hole. I don't know what awaits on the other side, it could be heaven, it could be hell. All I know is by the time you arrive here, I'll be long gone. I'm going to sit here, and wait for the end. Wait for death. I know it will come slowly, and painfully, but that's OK, because I had so many perfect years.

This is the last report of the exploration vessel Halo 7. My name is Donald Stevens. The rest of the crew are missing, I am the last one left, although not for long.

I am in heaven, waiting to die.

23.

what waits on the other side

By Anonymous

Things haven't gone well ever since I graduated high school, but the last few months have been especially shitty. I haven't had the motivation to go to college, so ever since I was kicked out of the house, I've mostly just been getting high and browsing the internet. I've thought a lot about killing myself, and even got myself a helium tank. But that changed a few months ago, when I found a strange composition book sitting on my computer desk with "dream journal" in sharpie on the front, that I don't remember getting. I live completely alone, I haven't been burgled, so i honestly have no explanation for how it got there. When i opened it up, it was a journal i don't remember writing, talking about dreams i don't remember having . Here's a few of the most notable ones

The Journal:

-This was the first entry in the book. DEFINITELY in my handwriting. Some of the words were smudged with water, so I might have been crying

while writing it.

i was sitting on the couch in my apartment. the door was open
all the lights were on, except for the lights in the hallway, which was complete black

i suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of something being in the hall, something that was going to “drag me away”

i sat, completely paralyzed in fear, staring at the door to my apartment, unable to get up and close the door

-Most of the entries were kinda rambling and weird, like this one here. The word “alone” took up a full line, with a 2-3 inch space between each letter.

I was staring at my apartment wall,
the wallpaper peeled back, it was skin.
i peeled it all back and i saw the “tremendous”
it breathed heavy, but not loud
i walked back to look at it more
its organs coated the wall pulsing and bleeding
i reached my arms through them
inside it was empty, but i was not alone
someone put me on my knees
we were all breathing heavy
i waited for mine to stop.
i begged for it.

-This entry was written on one line per page in the comp book, making it take up 10+ pages

I was in fifth grade
i sat in the front row
the teacher told us that we had a guest speaker

the door opened, and a silhouette of a person walked through
It was like a shadow
IT dragged a small, visibly distressed dog along with it
It moved to the front of the classroom
It kicked and stomped on it
everyone watched it die
no one said anything
It was then that i noticed a kid sitting in the back row that i didn't recognize
he had been staring at me the whole time
-All the dreams seemed to be nightmares, but i never made any reference
to whether or not the dreams scared me

i was at a party in a night club,
it was heavily crowded and a big mosh pit had started
i sat near the entrance alone, watching the people
i saw someone run out the door to the club, i thought he was gonna throw
up, but he sat down about 5 or 6 feet from the door, facing the door
suddenly, i hear people in the back of the club start screaming and running
towards the front
a fire was spreading and had already taken up too much of the club to be
put out
at least 30 or so people pile onto the front door, pinning me half against the
wall, half against the outside
there was just too many people pushing
none of us got out
he was still staring at me
i still don't recognize him

-This one is the last entry in the journal, and its definitely the most smudged.

I'm ready to kill myself
I get my helium tank
i sit in my computer chair
i strap myself in
I kill myself
I find myself in a empty b l a c k void
I see the light
From the lights in my apartment
I get that feeling again
I'm in the black
IT's coming to drag me away

-Needless to say, I haven't had the courage to kill myself after reading this last entry, for fear of what might happen.

24.

the glyph

By Anonymous

Ninety stories above the sprawling web of the city, where the noise was a barely noticeable hum and the streets coursed through the downtown like a circuit board, the sky was so wide that the curvature of the earth was apparent. A modest blanket of clouds spread on the horizon beyond the towers and the stretch of homes beyond that. And in those clouds there was a slight darkening, a small disturbance of ashy gray within the flawless white. “Look, right there,” Kurt said, pointing out the window.

“I don’t see it,” Mark said.

“Your ghost pyramid.”

They stood by a bank of windows in Olympus Tower, a posh and expensive bar on the top floor of the tallest building in the city. They were celebrating Kurt’s latest art sale: an original painting of a metropolis transitioning to suburbs and fading into countryside. A wide scope of human habitation.

And cresting the horizon, Kurt had included a faint, hazy pyramid.

They turned away from the windows and walked back to their seat along the bar. The lounge was filled with people in casual sport coats and dresses. The bar sat elevated from the rest of the room, overlooking the ring of windows and onlookers.

Mark plopped into his seat and watched Kurt settle into his own.

“You know you’re obsessed, right?” Mark asked his friend.

“I prefer focused,” Kurt said. “Obsessed would be doing a dozen pyramid paintings in a month and bottling my urine.”

“Well, you’re off to a start.”

“Double whiskey, Woodford, thanks,” Kurt told the impeccably-groomed bartender.

“You really think you’re going to draw somebody out, don’t you?” Mark asked. His eyes didn’t leave Kurt; he looked at him the way some people look at a caged baboon, wondering if the lock was secure.

“Maybe somebody will notice, maybe not. The worst that could happen is people appreciate the surreal imagery.” He stopped and considered his words for a moment. “Hell, somebody already did. To the tune of ten grand.”

Kurt smiled at his last point, then accepted his whiskey from the waiter, sipped, and smiled again.

“Or maybe the Illuminati will come into your house and throw a bag over your head,” Mark shot back.

“Oh, I got strong locks.”

“I was joking.”

Kurt chuckled and took another sip of his whiskey, finishing with an obnoxiously loud smack of his lips. He didn’t intend to fulfill his urine-bottling prophecy, but he did intend to keep playing with the pyramid imagery in his paintings. It would encourage discussion in the art community. And hopefully the community as a whole. Because Kurt wanted discussion. It was the one thing that was not being done, and it was long overdue.

Because Kurt couldn't be the only person who saw the outlines of a pyramid every time he looked out on the horizon.

"Are you sure the walls in your apartment don't have lead in them?" Mark said, still staring.

"Don't I seem fine to you?"

"All except for the Egyptian-Illuminati ghost pyramid conspiracy stuff, yeah."

"Hey," came a female voice, and Kurt looked away from his friend.

"I know what you're talking about," said a young woman with jet-black hair, standing to his left. She leaned in towards him with a conspiratorial look in her eyes. They had a piercing quality. She looked mixed-race, but Kurt couldn't pin it exactly.

"You see it, right?" she went on.

"Yeah, who are—"

"I've seen it, too," she said, lower this time. "I've seen it in full."

"What is it?"

"Here," she said, and plucked a napkin from a neat stack. She withdrew a fountain pen and began writing.

"You go to the office building a block from here, the old Jinsi Institute building. You know it?"

Kurt nodded, watching as she jotted down the address anyway.

"Go at dark. Tonight. Go to the elevator on the first floor. Enter these numbers."

She slowed her scribbling so her napkin-notes were as legible as possible. They read,

4-2-6-2-10-5-1

Kurt narrowed his eyes as she wrote. Over his other shoulder, Mark was craning his neck, too, a smirk on his face.

She slipped Kurt the napkin, and he looked at the number again.

"Don't talk to anyone," the woman said, and backed away. Kurt watched her as she quickly turned and disappeared through the bar crowd, and

down the hall to the exit.

He looked down at the napkin again.

“So, you got her phone number, eh?” Mark said, nudging him. “That was quick. She must be a fan.”

“I don’t even know,” Kurt said. There were only seven digits, 4-2-6-2-10-5-1. Too short for a phone number, too long for a number without an area code.

“I don’t even know what the hell this is.”

“I guess she’s paranoid, too,” Mark said, and gazed out at the windows and the city as it turned into evening.

The clouds had dissipated and the night was clear as Kurt walked down the street toward the Jinsi Institute. The woman hadn’t told him a time, so he just waited until it was dark and then waited a little longer. It was a little past ten, and the night was still.

The old building wasn’t in the busiest area of the city. The Institute was still around, but it had seen better days and wasn’t exactly a thriving business. It stood a block away, rising up behind a row of closed fast-food restaurants and coffee shops. Kurt turned up the collar of his coat and jaywalked across the street. A lone car came by after he crossed and honked sharply.

He cut through a wide alley and came out into the courtyard below the Jinsi building. Exterior lights ran up the twelve-story structure, and cold fluorescent light spilled out of the main lobby entrance twenty yards away, but all the floors above were dead.

Kurt waited in the shadows, watching to see if anybody entered or exited the building. He questioned why he was even here—the fifth time he’d done so that night. He had the small hope that this was some sort of invitation into the exotic. That maybe he’d go inside and find the woman had led him

to a sex party, or that the office was at least a temporary meeting spot until the inevitable walk to her nearby apartment.

But despite her alluring appearance, there was nothing flirtatious with the way the woman had approached him.

He stepped away from his cover and casually approached the building, wondering how he would even get in. He had the unpleasant feeling that he was about to play the role of a felon instead of a playboy.

The glass double-doors were open. An aluminium pole was wedged between them and held them ajar. There was no broken glass or any other signs of forced entry.

Kurt poked his head through the gap.

He didn't risk a hello. The silence inside was indefinite. Compared to the street, it was like stepping into a sound-proof room.

Careful not to knock the pole out of place, Kurt lifted his legs over it and took ginger steps past the empty receptionist desk, cold-looking under the lobby lights. A single gleaming hallway led to a bank of elevators. He took his time approaching, expecting somebody to turn a corner and rush at him. At the end, with the elevator mere feet away, he peeked down the next hallway.

Empty. And silent. Confident now, he eased his walk and looked at the polished metal doors. There were two elevators.

He pulled out his phone and the napkin from the bar.

4-2-6-2-10-5-1

"What the hell," he muttered, and punched the numbers into his phone.

Nothing.

Not surprised, Kurt opened a text message menu and put the number in the contact field. He keyed in I'm here, and pressed send.

He waited, glancing down the hall again, suddenly uneasy that he had not kept his eyes on his surroundings.

The phone buzzed. Recipient not found.

Figures, he thought, then looked at the elevator directly in front of him.

There was no wait when he pressed the hail button. The doors opened immediately. Inside, the harsh lights stung his eyes, and he stood dead-center and watched the lobby carefully as the doors closed.

Holding up the note again to make sure, Kurt reached for the panel and pressed 4.

He braced himself for something unexpected, but the elevator rattled and rose and soon the doors slid open and a chime sounded. The immediate area beyond was lit by wall-mounted lights, and a shadowy hallway lay beyond.

Without stepping from the elevator, he pressed 2, and he was glad when the doors closed.

The second floor was as empty and dark as the fourth. So was the sixth. He readied himself as he pressed 2 again, fearing that some pissed-off goon would rush him upon his return to that floor. But it was as dead as he had left it.

Kurt let out a breath as the doors sealed him safely inside, and he summoned the elevator to the tenth floor.

A gnawing feeling formed in his gut as he climbed. Something about the length of the ride from two to ten struck Kurt as pitch-perfect pacing. Like somebody was setting him up for a big scare.

But the tenth floor held no surprises. It was more open, with an expanse of desks bathed in moonlight coming in through a tall set of windows. But no assailant jumped out of hiding.

He felt his heart calming as the elevator descended again. But perhaps it was inertia.

Fifth floor. Same as the last one.

When the doors closed, Kurt readied his finger for the last button-press, but stopped. His heart was suddenly not calm, and he did not know the reason.

He remained stone-still, and so did the elevator. In the polish of the metal doors he glanced at his reflection, just blurred enough so that he couldn't make out the details of his frightened face.

There was a shadow behind him.

He almost spun around, but kept himself from doing so. It wasn't a person. It was merely a dark spot taking up the air behind him.

No, it was a person, he thought. The spot had more shape to it than he initially realized: hunching shoulders, and a flat plane that looked like the brim of a hat.

Something kept him from turning. Instinct, he thought, or perhaps intuition.

The apparent man in the hat did not move. Intuition kept Kurt from dismissing the shape as a trick of the light. And it also kept him from turning around.

Kurt opened his mouth, but then thought back to the woman again.

Don't talk to anyone.

He had figured she meant to keep their encounter a secret, and her note hidden away. But a strange notion, perhaps not intuition but instead dim-witted deduction, made him think more cryptically.

Without saying a word, he pressed 1. The elevator shook, and he kept his eyes in front of him, watching the still figure, waiting for it to move.

His stomach sank. The elevator was climbing, not descending. He forgot the shadowed figure and looked instead at the digital readout above. Six. Seven. Eight.

He considered pressing the emergency stop, but decided against it. When he looked back at the doors, the shadow was gone. With a cheery beep, the doors opened to the tenth floor once more.

In the short time that had passed since he was there, something had changed. The office desks still sat lined up like soldiers, but the white gleam of moonlight was gone. Instead there was a much more diffuse glow to everything. The shadows were lessened, but everything seemed dimmer. A

faint reddish reflection traced the backs of the chairs.

Kurt stepped out into the hallway. The floor ate up the sound of his foot-falls.

To the right, an expansive hall lined on one side with windows stretched into near-blackness, save for a faint wash of light from around a corner.

Outside the nearest window, the sky had lost the haze of light pollution that was synonymous with city life. But an ebbing of crimson bathed the edges of the buildings next door.

The other elevator chimed, and the doors opened. Kurt spun around, but instead of the hat man, the woman from the bar stepped out.

“You made it. Good,” she said.

He marched up to her as she approached and they met an inch apart from each other.

“What’s going on? Something happened.”

“What? Did something go wrong?”

“I—huh? Yeah, the sky changed. There’s no lights. Did we trip something or, or something?”

“No, nothing’s changed.”

“Bull—”

“We’re not where we were just a minute ago.”

Kurt fell silent, and tilted his head at her.

“Huh?”

She looked towards the windows.

“So are you going to fill me in on what’s going on?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Yeah. Come this way.”

She turned and walked down the hallway at a slow pace, glancing at the windows to her left as she went along. Kurt followed.

“How’d you know what buttons to press on the elevator? Is that like some sort of pass-code or something?”

“No, I don’t think so. Not anymore. I think it’s just a random combination that leads you here. Just a coincidence.”

“I really don’t follow.”

“You know any guys that do programming?”

“No, I’m an artist..”

“Well when they debug their software, if there’s as much as a semicolon missing, the program doesn’t work right. Or it might work right but there’s this one kink that only happens if a certain set of triggers are hit. There’s no conscious structure behind it.”

“Now I really don’t follow.”

“It’s just something that’s not meant to be there that people stumble upon. In Korea, the numbers have a particular meaning. They’re more linked with hell and other bad things. Like six-six-six over here. That’s how they stumbled upon it. After that it spread around on the Internet, and that’s how I found out about it.”

“Are you Korean too or something?”

She turned back to look at him.

“No. Why’s that matter?”

“I, it doesn’t. I—”

Once again she turned her attention to the windows.

“Well what’s this got to do with the pyramid?” he asked. “I don’t get it.”

She went up to one of the windows and peered back towards the side of the building they had walked from.

“Here. Take a look for yourself.”

From the other side of the glass, the glow was more strong than before. It cast a red hue on the woman’s face.

Shuffling up next to her, Kurt turned and looked out into the night.

The buildings outside looked familiar. Except they were all dark. The streetlamps, too. There was not a single light on in the area. But the dull red glow illuminated everything like the moon. Out beyond the next intersection, an expanse of shadow hid most of the downtown area. Shapes of other

office buildings silhouetted against a haze in the distance.

In the distance. Glowing evenly up to its pointed top, was the pyramid.

Black hills rolled down and out of the reach of the pyramid's light, but the object appeared to float above them. Only the edge of its foundation was covered up by a jutting summit; the rest could be seen, hovering perfectly in the air, its distance behind the hills impossible to tell. It was large enough to not be obscured by holding a thumb up to it.

"How... how far away is it?"

"I don't know. Very far."

It was strangely flat-looking. It didn't really look like a pyramid as much as it did an icon of a triangle emblazoned in the sky. Its light was stronger around the edges, reminding Kurt of a neon sign.

"What is it? Do you know that?"

"An alien moon. A no-trespassing sign. You got me."

"I was wrong to call it a pyramid," Kurt marveled.

"Yes, it's more like a symbol."

"You don't think it has structure? Like a ship or something?"

"Honestly, I don't know," she said.

He turned away from the sight, finally. No amount of time spent looking at it could make him understand it any better.

They met eyes again. The woman's yielded nothing.

"What is this place?" Kurt asked. Exhaustion seeped in his words.

"I don't know if this is a 'where' or not. We're obviously still here. In this town."

"Those hills aren't part of this town. What's out there?"

"I've only ever stepped outside for a few minutes."

"You've been here before."

"Three times. Only for a half-hour, tops. You get antsy if you stay here too long."

"I bet. So what—"

"Other people have been here, too. In other parts of the world. Same

thing, though. No light. Triangle in the distance. All empty.”

“It’s not something to do with this building?”

“No. It’s any building. Any elevator.”

“So why—

“You can help me find out. You already put out a net, with your work. People know you. The information’s out there, but it’s unorganized. If you—”

There was a crash from under their feet. They froze.

Silence. Then the sound of glass smashing, muffled through the floor, on the level below.

The woman’s eyes shot up to him.

“You didn’t talk to the man in the hat, did you?”

“So I wasn’t just imagining that.”

“You didn’t, right?”

“No, I didn’t even look at him.”

Her eyes darted around. A bead of sweat rolled down her temple.

“This never happened before?”

“No.”

Something massive fell over on the floor below, rattling the walls.

“C’mon,” the woman said, and grabbed his hand.

They ran back down the hall from where they came, passing the elevator and heading towards the graveyard of desks and chairs.

Something hit a wall downstairs and shattered. Kurt could hear pieces clattering to the ground.

He wondered how close the stairwell was, and if whatever was downstairs would use it.

“This way, here!” the woman said, pulling him along. The office’s red haze had a dream-like quality to it, and Kurt felt as if he were floating as the woman tugged his arm.

She took him to one of the large windows and began to work the latch. Outside was a section of flat roof, lined with pebbles. The window

screached open and the woman stepped out, lifting her leg high up over the ledge.

He had expected a draft to come through. Or the howling of wind upon her opening the window. But the air outside was just as still as in the building, even ten stories up.

As he swung his leg over the frame, Kurt lost his balance and fell out onto the stones. The woman was already trotting to the edge of the roof, where the rungs of a metal ladder protruded. He scrambled to his feet, kicking up pebbles, and followed. The woman turned and looked at him as she climbed down, and then her face disappeared over the edge. Kurt turned and walked backwards down the rungs next, glancing up only to reassure himself that the triangle was still in the distance.

And it was. It hung in the sky, unchanged.

There was a metallic clang as the woman's feet hit the first landing, and Kurt was soon with her. Flights of fire-stairs zig-zagged down the side of the building. The two of them zipped down the steps on the balls of their feet, neither of them saying a word.

The courtyard was just as Kurt had left it when he had scoped out the building earlier. Except for that the moonlight was now red and dim, and the nearby buildings were more visible, all their windows dark and empty.

They walked around the edge of the building towards the front, where the intersection sat like a frozen river. There were no cars to busy its streets. There weren't even any vehicles parked along the side; they had all vanished.

Kurt turned his attention from the street to the tops of the buildings above, and the tip of the triangle rising behind them.

"So you say that people in other parts of the world came through, and saw that thing in the sky, just the same as here?"

"Yeah," the woman said, glancing around. She tugged at his shirt collar to keep him moving.

“And they see that thing no matter what part of the world they’re in?”

“Yeah.”

“God.”

“Shhh.”

The woman had stopped. She pressed her palm against his chest, and they both trained their eyes on the building next door. Under the breezeway of the first floor, standing amidst the shadows, was a darker, more defined shape. It had a flat top, like the brim of a hat.

Kurt could hear the rush of the woman’s panicked breaths. The hat-man didn’t move, nor did he made any indication that he had seen them.

A noise like a gunshot. A trashcan or some other metallic object echoed as it struck a wall from within the alleyway.

They didn’t wait to see what it was. The woman darted back to the propped open double-doors. From behind them came a scraping sound, like something pushing a dumpster out of the way.

Another crash. And the groan of metal.

The doors bounced in Kurt’s vision and the woman ran ahead of him, pulling him by the hand once more. They plowed through the entrance, knocking the pole away and letting the doors fall shut.

She led him towards the elevator. Kurt noticed, despite his panic, that their shoes didn’t echo off the marble floor.

Frantically, the woman jabbed at the buttons until the elevator opened. They piled in and she jammed her thumb into the door-close button.

“How do we go back?” Kurt hollered. “Do you reverse it?”

“No, no, it’s the same numbers!”

She punched the fourth-floor button over and over. It didn’t move.

“Shit, we have to start from ten!”

She hit the tenth-floor button. But the 4 stayed lit as well.

“Cancel! Cancel!” she shouted, hitting the ground-floor button now.

“What are you doing?”

The elevator shook and moved. They sank. From the ground floor the elevator traveled to the basement. And then it kept going.

“Stop it! Go back up!” Kurt shouted. His voice echoed inside the tight space. The number readout went blank. And the elevator kept sinking.

Then the box shuddered, and they went still. The woman had given up her idea and cowered against the wall with Kurt.

The doors slid open.

Whatever level they were on, it was the darkest. A wall of blackness greeted them. Kurt tensed, pressing himself as far back as he could, waiting for something to jump out of the dark.

The doors remained open.

A hissing sound rose and fell and Kurt strained to listen, but then he realized it was the woman’s panicked breaths.

He took a step forward. She gripped his arm and advanced as well.

Not even a foot of visibility yielded to him as he peeked his head out. Nothing caught the reflection of the lights from the elevator. Kurt stuck out his hand next, feeling air.

“Let’s go back up,” the woman whispered into his ear.

“Hold on.”

As he trained his ears, there finally was a sound to be heard: a dull hum. Electric, vibrating through his skin.

He took a step out of the elevator and tested the ground. It was solid, but didn’t feel like marble or cement. His foot planted onto nothing and stopped. There was a slight give, like walking on a padded surface.

The woman followed as he stepped all the way out of the elevator.

“Do you have a lighter or anything?” he asked, quietly as he could.

“No.”

He pulled out his cell phone and tapped open a menu. The meager light illuminated nothing, and he gave up and put it away again.

They walked in small increments, going in a straight line from the elevator, feeling ahead for obstructions. The electronic hum never got any louder. He noticed something else, as well. Even though they were out of reach from the elevator's light, he could still see his arms. The woman's frightened face was perfectly clear next to him; no shadows obscured her.

He turned and looked back at the white rectangle of light that they had stepped out of. There was nothing else illuminated around it, except for a dull blue shaft rising up above it. It was half the width of the elevator. As Kurt trained his eyes upwards, the shaft, barely visible against the dark, reached upwards until it was a thin line, and then nothing.

What the hell.

The woman screamed and latched onto him.

“Wha—”

But then he saw it. Underneath them. Far below, like a sea monster gazing up through a glass-bottom boat, was a giant set of eyes.

They were football-shaped. And massive. Perfectly white except for dull, emotionless halos for pupils.

He was already stepping away. But the eyes remained stationary, so large and far away, like the red triangle. And then they blinked, and the blackness returned.

Now Kurt was pulling the woman as they sprinted for the elevator. The portal of light seemed to get smaller, and he imagined the doors closing them off forever in the void. But it was a trick of the eye, and soon they reached the elevator and threw themselves inside.

The woman collapsed to the floor and Kurt immediately shut the doors.

“What should I do?” he said, not containing his panic very well. The woman was worse off, clawing at her hair and gasping for breath, trying to sob.

“What floor?”

She moaned something unintelligible and continued digging into her scalp.

“Screw it,” he said, and hit the button for the tenth floor.

They shook again, and began to climb. Kurt fell back and collapsed against the wall, sliding down into place next to the woman. She pawed at his legs, and he pulled her into a sitting position and held her against him.

He didn’t want to ask her any more questions. He could barely digest everything anyway. As they sat in silence, he tried to take his mind away from wrapping itself around their situation. He couldn’t help but be reminded of *The Great Gatsby* and the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, staring over the ash heaps like the eyes of God.

With a sharp squeal of metal, the elevator stopped. He heard the woman draw a breath, and they both looked expectantly at the doors.

Silence filled their space, and they waited. Kurt began to pull himself up, and he reached for the keypad.

He pressed the door-open button. The elevator didn’t respond.

Floor ten once more. Then ground level. Nothing.

Then the doors shrieked, and Kurt jumped back. But they remained closed.

Another piercing sound: the sound of something clawing against metal.

Behind him, the woman began muttering again. He fell back next to her. Something slammed into the doors next, and he saw them bend inward slightly.

“What do we do?” she asked him, her voice a tremble.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “Pray.”

Pray to what at this point, he didn’t know, but the image of the eyes of God never left his mind.

25. innawoods

By Anonymous

My name is Adam. Back when I was 19, I had just gotten engaged to my girlfriend of 2 years, Mars. She was always a stay at home athlete and liked to play video games. I like to camp, hike and plink with my trusty 10\22, and figured going camping would be a great way to celebrate us getting engaged finally. After some egging on she reluctantly agreed, so we packed up necessities; Food, batteries, and liquor, lots of liquor. And ammo for our guns. We brought about 3 10\22 rifles for all of us to plink with when we got bored, and we brought Mars' AR15 she'd been decking out. Once we were finished packing up whatever we needed, we met up with my best friend Jake and his sister Janet. Jake and Janet were really chilled out all the time, philosophical stereotypical stoner types. Absolutely amazing people though. We also met up with another guy from work, Ben. He was a quiet loner, but always tagged along when we would go hiking since he liked being away from work.

We set off in Jakes truck and drove for a few hours after we got breakfast, it was a perfect morning, clear skies, perfect temperature, absolutely optimal for camping. We set off at about 11 o'clock and got about 3/4th the way to Jakes perfect spot when suddenly his truck ran out of gas. He said he'd fill it up before we got to his place when I had talked to him on the phone earlier. I looked at him and asked what the deal was, he just looked at me and said; "Sorry dude, guess I forgot." Annoyed, we decided to trek it since we'd come all this way and were too far out to start walking back. We agreed that we'd figure something out when we left later on.

We walked for about 2 hours give or take, but finally we reached the clearing we'd been searching for, Jake, happy that the walking was over, decided to light up a bud almost the second we stepped into the clearing. I set up the fire since it was going to get dark in a few hours, while Mars and Janet made awkward conversation and set up the tents. Ben sat to the side listening to his iPod, but he never said much anyway.

After we had everything in place, we began drinking and roasting marshmallows on the fire, enjoying the outdoors like any kids should. It was about 5PM and still a beautiful day. We discussed what we'd do tomorrow morning, how we disliked our bosses and so on. After some excessive drinking and partying in general, we all called it a night around 10PM. We crawled into our tents, except for Ben who stayed by the fire, doodling in his notepad.

Mars and I had been asleep for about an hour or so when I was awoken by a loud yelping sound, kind of like when someone stubs their toe really hard. I peeked my head out of the tent and saw Ben standing there looking startled. He looked at me and simply said "Oh, sorry for waking you Adam." I was a bit annoyed but shrugged it off and went back to sleep. About 30 minutes later I heard the same yelp. I got up because I was beyond irritated at this point and stomped outside my tent looking for Ben.

But Ben was in his tent, sound asleep. I was confused but just sighed and turned back to go back to sleep. While entering my tent I suddenly heard

heavy breathing and twigs snapping from the nearby wooded area. I don't know why, but I froze with a level of cold fear I hadn't felt before in my life, followed with inexplicable dread.

I stood there for what felt like a good solid hour simply staring into the dark tent until Mars woke up and asked me what's wrong. I gestured to her.

“Shh.”

I reached for her AR-15, loaded and racked it. I stepped out of the tent and looked around, still full of fear and liquid courage. Suddenly a loud crackling like sound from the other end of the woods. I jerked my body towards it and accidentally discharged a round into the brush, waking everyone else up. Everyone asked what the hell I was doing, and I just replied “Oh, I saw a deer... Sorry everyone.” before crawling back into my tent and finally getting to sleep.

Morning came slowly but surely, and everyone was groggy and visibly irritated at me about my incident during the night. We made some chilli for breakfast, then went hiking and plinked a bit, and everyone seemed to forget about last night. Except me. I still felt that dread linger in me. I can't explain it but, it just lingered. I figured I was just being scared of my own shadow and finally loosened up around the afternoon. Nothing eventful happened after all of that, then night fell once again.

It was a cold night, so we built a massive fire to keep us toasty and rolled some logs up to it so we didn't have to sit on the grass. Ben, as usual, stayed within eye-shot, but away from the group. I noticed he was drawing more frantically than normal, but I ignored it since he's always been the strange type. We spent most of the evening talking about whatever came to mind, boasting, the usual. Mars was feeling drained from the hike, which is unusual since she's in pretty good physical shape. She rested her head on my shoulder and eventually dozed off whilst we chatted amongst ourselves.

While we were talking, a sudden, beyond loud sound of a tree falling with incredible force swept through our camp. We all jumped up in panic and looked at each other. We had all heard it, and it was rather close. Before we

could say another word, another tree. This one was very close, and loud. Before we could react to it, like a plague, that same fear and dread from the other night came rushing back with a vengeance. Everyone felt it and we all panicked. We all began feeling violently ill and weak, but with the adrenaline pumping through us, we grabbed our rifles and made a formation. Nobody stayed calm, and Janet and Jake were reduced to tears because of how scared they were, I couldn't even hold a rifle properly.

And then we heard it, a blood curdling scream. And then another, and another. Me and Ben kept an eye out while everyone grabbed what was important to them. When we had packed up we ran as fast as our legs could carry us down the steep hill on which our camp sat. Janet tripped and badly injured her foot. I'll never know what got into that boy but Ben ran to her, hoisted her up on his shoulders and ran ahead of us with her on his back.

We kept running but the screams followed close. We finally reached the truck and, forgetting it was empty, we jumped in and tried to start it. The screams got closer, and trees began falling again. We made the only choice we had, and that was to leg it on foot. Ben and Janet ran ahead of us, how Janet ran with a severely injured foot I will never know. She outran Mars, me, Jake and even Ben.

We ran until the screams stopped, and ran some more. Finally though, we stopped to catch our breath.

We rested for about 5 or 10 minutes, not even talking, just getting as much air as we could and making sure our rifles were ready to go. In the midst I look up and see a naked man staring at us. I freeze, and not thinking, yell out to him. "Hey! Are you lost?!" That's when Mars chimed in and said "Adam! We need to leave now!" I looked at her in confusion and she shouted "Dude, look at his head!" This is when I realized his head was a triangular shape, nothing I've ever seen on a human before.

Then that yelp. Then what I could only guess what was hundreds more, one after the other. I felt an amount of adrenaline I couldn't even begin to explain, we all felt it, and legged it as fast as we could, clumsily jumping

over branches, rocks, you name it. I had made it ahead of the group with them close behind when I looked back, but before I could turn my head back I tripped and my head made contact with concrete. We'd made it to the highway. We stopped running but make good pace walking back down where we'd came from, and we eventually arrived at a gas station and dozed off outside since it was closed.

Later that morning, we hitched a ride with an elderly couple who were going our way. Ben had dropped his notepad in his rush to grab Janet, and while we were on our way home, I went to give it to him, but he was asleep, and I didn't want to wake him. I decided to flip through his drawings. Kid has talent to say the least. I noticed he drew some things and dated them. I looked at them, and dated from the night before, were trees falling, and then a legion of triangle headed men standing in the exact same stance as the one we'd been chased by.

26.

the greyman

By Anonymous

My friend Aaron and I were driving home from my friend's apartment in Tulsa. It was nearly midnight, give or take a few minutes. We had to be back in BA by three to pick up our friend from his shift at Burger King. We'd smoked some bud several hours prior, but it was mostly out of our system, we'd been chilling smoking cigarettes and listening to music.

So we go to get on the highway to BA, and in that area there's like twenty billion highways that all interconnect, as long as you can get on one you can get anywhere. So we pull up to an on-ramp near a store called "Tulsa Stove Hospital", this weird old empty building full of rusted out stoves. We kind of laugh at how creepy it is, and get on the highway to head home. We drive for a few minutes, and then merge onto another highway, but instead of carrying us on, that highway drops us right back in front of Tulsa Stove Hospital. Of course, this doesn't feel right. We blame it on the weed we'd smoked hours earlier (Even though there was no way that could have done it), and continued on.

This happened about four times, each time dropping us in front of the Tulsa Stove Hospital, which grew eerier and eerier to look at every time we ended up next to it. It was about this time that we realized that we were absolutely the only vehicle on the roads. You might say “Well duh, it was midnight” but remember, this is just a mile or so from the Cain’s/Brady district area, and there were concerts that night. But everything was abandoned, and the only other vehicles we saw were a handful of unmarked white vans that we would see speeding around occasionally. We even saw rail-road lights start and come down to let one of the vans through.

Anyway, this is where shit gets really fucked. We get back on the highway, the first one we tried, for another go round. It’s a blind turn on that on-ramp, so when we see purplish lights flashing around the bend we slow down thinking it’s a cop. Thing is, when we get up there, the lights vanish and there’s no car, cop or otherwise, for miles around. We keep driving, again chalking it up to the marijuana.

These next few events happen within the space of about a minute.

I was the one driving, and as I was driving along the highway I began seeing dark figures darting around on either side of the road. They seemed small and fast, but vaguely humanoid, too fast to count, but bold enough to enter the centre of my vision (which is another sign it wasn’t a THC hallucination). After noticing these things, and becoming quite sure they were real, I began hearing footsteps coming from my right side, solid enough to make noise when they hit and keeping pace with the car at seventy miles per hour. I asked Aaron if he heard them, but I don’t remember his response, I was too panicky. After a minute or so we heard a THUMP! as if the car had hit someone, and immediately afterwards another THUMP! from right behind us in the back seat, like someone had dropped something heavy in or walked into a wall that wasn’t there. I slowly turned around to see what it was, and there, in my back seat, on the right side of the car (the same side the footsteps were on) sat what I have come to call The Grey Man.

It was three or four feet tall and was completely dark charcoal grey from head to toe. It had no features, no clothing or face or skin or marks anywhere on it, it was all this dark charcoal grey color. Its limbs were limp and its outline was blurred, as if it was bending light around it in some way, but it had a definite humanoid shape. I didn't get a good look at its hands or below its waist, because I immediately screamed at the top of my lungs "AARON THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE CAR! THERE'S SOMETHING IN HERE WITH US!". As soon as it left my mouth, the Grey Man hissed at me, a terrible noise that was not so much a hiss like a cat, but more shrieky, akin to the noises the Nazgul made in the Lord of the Rings movies. Aaron heard it screamed and responded by turning around shouting "WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT THING??"

We threw on the interior lights, and we got lucky, because it seemed not to like that. It moved laterally out of the car, kind of blinking through the car door, but leaving a visual trail as something moving extremely fast would, so it was clear it didn't just vanish or teleport or something like those out-of-the-corner-of-your-eye things do.

The minute has passed

Obviously we are now very, very freaked out. We floor it and drive on the highway in a straight line, figuring that we can't be looped back if we never turn or merge. It's important to note that we are still the only car on the road in this entire time, on this whole highway leaving Tulsa. The side going towards Tulsa, however, is now packed entirely with unmarked white vans and trucks. So we drive for quite a while, we drive until we reach a country road on the other side of Sand Springs. One turn will take us toward Tulsa, so we turn in the opposite direction, drive for a block, and once again are in front of... you guessed it, the Tulsa stove hospital.

The air at this point is extremely thick and everything in the world is looming scarier than anything I've ever seen, especially that store. It's giving us the worst vibes I've ever felt. Since we kept getting drawn towards it we decided to try to escape. We decided to again drive in a straight line, but only stop if

we found other humans. We considered other options, but we couldn't get a phone or internet signal, and Aaron's GPS was jammed, returning only the message "Cannot verify current location".

Remember how I said the road into Tulsa was packed with the unmarked white vans and trucks, how they'd increased in number? Well they're everywhere now. All of the windows are blacked out on them, occasionally we'd see in and see someone with a jacket and glasses looking back at us. They're speeding everywhere, occasionally accompanied by unmarked white cars apparently running escort for them.

After several minutes of driving and trying not to draw attention to ourselves, we find a QuikTrip. Now, we'd been to this QuikTrip earlier in the night and it had been PACKED, but now it was deserted. There was a single employee, not even a manager, nobody stocking in the back, no customers, nobody getting gas.... nobody at all but us. We explained what had happened to us, and he didn't bat an eye. He seemed to understand exactly what we meant, and he gave us very specific directions as to where to drive, and we left.

After driving for a few more minutes, confident that we'd found a way out, Aaron suddenly leans out of the window and yells "WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT THING IN THE SKY?". I lean around to see what he's looking at, and what I see scares the shit out of me. There was a giant thing, kind of cylindrical in shape but with something up top that makes the overall shape something of an inverted tear-drop. It was bigger than any helicopter or plane, and clearly not shaped like one anyway. It was slowly drifting down as if it was landing, and all of the white vehicles we'd been seeing around were driving towards where it was headed.

After that we floored it and didn't stop until we got to BA, only allowing each other to repeat the QuikTrip man's directions and say nothing else. We didn't sleep until we passed out from exhaustion, and we woke up with me guarding his window and him guarding his door.

There are a total of five people including myself who I have talked to who have encountered the grey man, and agree on the physical description as well as what leads up to his appearing.

There are a total of three people including myself who I have talked to who can attest to that area of Tulsa being deserted, the white vans being everywhere, and the highways seemingly glitching. One of said witnesses was out later than us and reported black helicopters arriving before she left the streets.

27. my dear friend

By Anonymous

Did you ever think
on a warm summer's night
on the soft cool grass
under pale moonlight
that someday everything you know
will fade away like melting snow?

Did you ever dream
in a cold dark room
that you slept in the depths
of your future tomb
and even though the sky was blue
that no sun would shine down on you?

Did you ever wake
with a chill of fright
and quickly reach out
to turn on the light
for even though no one was there
you felt warm breath against your hair?

And now I will say
There's no need to fear
I am always with you
I am always here
You didn't want to be alone
so now why do you cry and moan?

Did you ever hope
that I'd go away?
You tell me to leave
but I think I'll stay
You said that you needed a friend
I'll be with you til your world's end

28, untitled

By Anonymous

The old man wears his finest clothes as he walks up to the podium. His tired face looks melted by the endless tug-of-war between time and his ageing bones. His bow-tie is silk and neat, his cumberbund hugs his waist, and the tails of his coat reach his back legs. The faintest glimmer of a smile appears as a shaky hand pushes a pair of reading glasses onto his face.

The audience of nobody - a thousand shadows camouflaged by the dark island on which they and their addresser sit - look on without perspective, without the ability to sense movement or light.

The arms of the pale statue upon which the podium sits uphold the invisible laws with outstretched palms, its fingers creating a shield to the audience so that they may not read its grim statutes, and turning towards the old man the codes of law sit scrawled upon the lines and creases of the hand, cupped inwards so that only he may gaze upon them.

The sounds of the swamp herald the beginning of his speech; cicadas cry

and screech against the mating calls of frogs, and the frogs against the grunts of the crocodiles against the silent rumble of the roiling, stagnant water.

“If you stand still, the mosquitoes eat you alive,” the old man begins.

“We learned this from those we gave as sacrifice to the gaping maw of the jungles. Orders for insect repellent rolled in almost as fast as orders for munitions. A new lesson is spit out every time we begin a new rite, and the lesson is almost always as unexpected as the last. A practical application for what we learn comes first, but as we look further into it we can see a more symbolic meaning appear. As we taught men to stand still and save face, we should have understood to take the opposite route if we were to remain unconsidered as a threat. Sometimes, the lesson we must learn is the most obvious at the time. If you stand still, the mosquitos eat you alive.”

He scans his eyes across at the empty grass below.

“So we began moving. One bite is worrying, as you can contract a disease, however small the chances. But with more bites comes a bigger chance for sickness, and soon you will be covered in welts. To remain in the dark we had to avoid any glowing spots that could alert the public to where we were. And so we moved. And we kept moving. We shifted around parking lots and subways, and in congress we kept our heads down towards the prepared speeches and teleprompters. The beauty of our manifest lay within our reactions towards those who tried to follow our movements.

“In the boxing ring, people think the winner is the fighter who remains standing at the end of twelve rounds, when the actual winner is the promoter, who can watch from the stands and feels a victory tenfold of that which a winning prizefighter feels. To win in the boxing match of the world we created and lived in, the best counter to a right hook was to not be there at all, to keep the snoops and spooks punching at the air until they were too weak to stand.”

The old man brings his hand up to his wrinkled throat, briefly touching it out of habit or ritual, his eyes briefly staring into the past before his breath catches in his throat silently, and he continues.

“Years ago, I stated that the human mind had the greatest and most frightening potential of any other being. We began looking at our models and graphs and started to worry. The attention of the public was locked on the wrong thing, but peer into the shadows long enough and your eyes adjust to the dark. As we studied more about what awakens the brain, we learned more about homogenization. We already knew about the tendency of setting aside petty difference when faced with a greater danger, and the tendency to settle into a state of petty difference when no danger is felt. What we didn’t know – where the danger came from – was our unawareness that even differences as large as culture and identity can be cast away when faced with a large enough perceived threat. The public was no longer distracted by the ineffectual and meaningless. And we panicked. In panic we made mistakes, and those mistakes led to their eyes adjusting to the dark.”

He pauses. The swamp goes dead, only breezes occasionally lazily blowing the branches of the trees provides relief to the silence.

“We continued studying and experimenting despite our hopeless situation, as if scientists adrift and doomed in an alien world. We tested and tested and tested, spending nights looking for a way out. Irony always lies in plain sight, as we found out. Our salvation came through the very patterns we had recognized as the threat. If you push people too far, if you face them with too much death, or the threat of death, they abandon all principle towards each other. They leave behind all notions of identity, familiarity and culture, and instead cling to any living thing they can find, becoming like a sanctuary, but still without any repose. That’s when all those disasters came, back to back. Just in time for the public to begin looking for the truth in the shroud around them, the might of a false evil turned them into beasts of fear. The lesson we learned from that? Homogenization works best at extremes. When our studies once again pointed towards the potential of the mind, we finally had a grasp of what to do. At last, playing it by ear had led us to finally breaking into stride. And we worked. And we moved. And we kept those mosquitoes from landing on us.”

“Our black waltz around perception turned into a halt. We checked the charts. We didn’t have to do the work anymore, the public was doing it for us. They broke down into groups of their own accord. So used to the intangible system we had built for them, people began operating on autopilot. People will point fingers, people will discover patterns, but the maze of information that has been created by the others who point fingers and discover patterns keep our enemies safely lost. If one finds what they think to be the room where the Minotaur sleeps, they claim victory, not knowing that the monster they see was created by another misguided searcher of truth. They have weaved a web of lies and deceit better than we ever could have dreamt of weaving. It’s to the point where we ourselves cannot determine the lies we tell, the lies they tell themselves, and the truth both of us look for. And so that was it. Our goal of an entirely artificial perception of reality was realized. There is no possibility of even recognizing us anymore. No matter what a person does, no matter how they may try to subvert the plans of a malevolent controlling force, they are doomed to do exactly what will keep them benign, what we want them to do.”

“Once again, as time has proven, the irony is lying in plain sight. The human mind, so eager to ascend to its’ potential, is in itself the obstacle preventing it from happening. And the lesson we learned from this final series of events? Even if the reasoning behind what we do has been lost to the annals of history, the apocalypse that cannot be seen will continue long after I die.”

The sounds of the swamp once again came back into hearing, a respectful applause to the old man. He looked down and laughed to himself, quietly and dryly. The drooping branches of the willows wave down by his podium in celebration as the glow of the fireflies swarming by their leaves escort the people who weren’t there back to the homes they didn’t have.

29.

the formless

By Anonymous

It's been trying to get in for hours. The thing that's been stalking me. The formless, I call it, it takes the shape of liquid, water mostly, and follows you. And then, when it thinks it's got you all alone, it solidifies. It imitates a human, though its disguise is easy to see through. I saw it as a woman the first time, whilst walking by the canal. One minute the path was empty, I put my head down and when I looked up again 'she' was standing there. I immediately sensed something was wrong, the way she was standing there was too unnatural, and when she moved her hand to wave, her arm jerked, like a puppet. I turned and ran, followed only by ripples, splashes and drips in the canal.

That was months ago, and I haven't been out in almost all that time. I was hiding out in my bedroom first, but then I knocked over a glass of water. I managed to dive out of the door just before it formed. I leant against the door with all my might, crying and praying it wouldn't overpower me. I was lucky.

After that I relocated to my garage. I barricaded under the doors and windows with anything I could find, old sheets, clothes, and compost. I snuck into the kitchen once, when I couldn't take the hunger any more. I made it out with food, but only as I heard the faucet rumble into life. Another time it was smart, it used cunning. I heard a knock on the door, in the evening. And a voice, a strong, male voice. 'Are you there? It's the police?' I remember the feeling of relief, I wasn't alone, I had help! But then, just before I opened the door, I heard the voice again. 'Come...outside.' Somewhat forced, with a strange pause between the two words. It very nearly got me that time. But now I fear my luck is running out, the food is running out again, and I think it's found a way to get to me. The rain. It started about an hour ago, never letting up, and always intensifying. I hear it smacking into the windows, and crashing against the door. It's going to get in, there's no doubt about that. But I had an idea, a way I can stop it, destroy it even. Fire. I can burn a massive fire, so that the water turns to steam, and the creature evaporates into nothing. There was a few canisters of fuel in the garage, and a lighter in my pocket. I grabbed the cans, and covered the whole of the place in gasoline, but just as tried to spark the lighter, I saw something out of the corner of my eye, and realised my mistake.

~morte~